

After The Midnight Rain

by Joe Springer

A Novel

Copyright © 2025 by Joseph Springer,
All Rights Reserved.

May not be reproduced in any form without written permission of the author.
May not be read or scanned or accessed or used by AI (Artificial Intelligence).

Contact (address obscured to thwart bots):

a f t e r t h e m i d n i g h t r a i n

a t

g m a i l

d o t

c o m

1

Mary Westfall looked up from her book as he came in. "Paul," she said.

Paul faced the window, but didn't turn from the window to her.

She waited. She knew enough to wait. When he is like that, she thought, best to wait until he is ready to speak.

Paul didn't move.

She went back to her book.

Robbie walked in. "Oh, what are you reading?" he asked, but without waiting he leaned over and started reading. "*Fundamentals of Fluid Mechanics*, oh so fascinating," he sneered.

She looked at him but didn't respond. He read aloud over her shoulder: "It is possible to simulate turbulent flows of fluid that have moderate Reynolds numbers by using the Navier–Stokes equations." Stepping away from the book and Mary, he said to no one in particular, "Basically, how to push liquids around, just like corporations push people around, huh," he said and turned and left the room. She wasn't surprised by Robbie's reactions. Ever since he fell in with that group from the community center he'd been spouting off like he did. Paul turned towards her for a moment, without saying anything. She wondered how Paul felt. He'd been so closed so long, ever since he was hurt. Suddenly, she wondered if she sensed he wanted to speak to her. He turned back to looking out the window. Mary quietly said, "Paul...", but did not go on. She wasn't yet sure he heard her, and she wasn't sure what she wanted to say.

The quiet almost silent *whirr* of the motor under his chair told her he was not going to speak to her this time. She wondered how long it was since she heard him say anything. The quiet hum of the motor continued, and then he was out of the room.

She waited.

I love this room, she said to herself. Looking out to the trees, memories of her younger years when her mother was still alive, warmth of the days she ran from the trees back to the house to dinner were the happiness of those days. She smiled to herself, then realized that there were no smiles here these days. Maybe they smiled to themselves, or maybe they didn't. She doubted it. Why couldn't they at least be happy about the happiness they had once, even if they weren't so happy now. She admitted to herself she had many days in recent years without the family warmth, but that didn't stop her from recalling back to days when she was truly happy. When she did, she indeed brought happiness back to her present.

She turned back to the textbook. She was happy in her work. She was aware most women, if not all the women she had met before she went off to college, didn't understand fluid mechanics. Or even most in

college. It was in engineering class she finally felt at home, something she could study and understand. She could forget about everything else in her world when she was in engineering. So it didn't matter whether the women she had known growing up knew anything about fluids or even cared. They didn't go off to college either.

It took her mind away from her family, it took her mind away from where she came from. She didn't mind her studying, her late nights to master some formulas she would need for her exams, her keeping to herself for most of her college years. Tuition took a lot of money, money she had borrowed from her father, but once that she graduated and hired by the oil company, she set up an automatic transfer from her account to her father's. Money she had borrowed for her tuition had since already been paid back by the time of Paul's accident. She didn't want to keep score, but she knew she would not stop the automatic transfer now that Paul was in the wheelchair, and her father was laid off when the factory closed.

She closed her eyes. She didn't want to admit that she was the main breadwinner in the family now. Father did an occasional stretch of truck driving, auto mechanic, part time deliveries, whatever he could get his hands on. But times were tough around here, and there were plenty of men looking for work.

She would be leaving Monday, back to Houston. She was designing part of the fluid map for a new refinery, codenamed Zebra. She didn't even know where the Zebra complex was to be built. As part of the design team, she was privy to some of the environmental statistics about the complex locale. Some document would have the weather statistics, and she supposed if she wanted to she could gather up the precipitation records, temperature ranges, and the like, and then run a search for places that met those criteria.

She, and no one on her team, knew the location--not even the country--of the Zebra complex. She wasn't sure she really cared where it was. Speculating about the location was like listening to gossip, it had no interest for her. Security and secrecy was the order of the day at the company, and that suited her fine. She found herself approving of the need to keep quiet about many things, and she included herself in that set of things deserving of secrecy and privacy. Even to the idea of keeping secrets from herself, although she wasn't ready to admit that last part to herself. Yet.

2

Maybe it's better to keep silent. It seems a way, Paul Westfall thought to himself. A way to live, to cope. Otherwise I might just go mad. I did go mad at first. Now I best look at part of the world. Everything together... I feel myself too exposed. And that anger and despair I felt could have consumed me. It did consume me at the time. And it still might. And lord knows, I am still angry. But if I sit with myself and let that anger overwhelm me, then I lost. I would be lost without purpose.

It took me a long time to get here. I would give anything to stand again, stand on my own two feet, to be able to walk, to run. And that's all I have thought about every minute of every day since. While I have hope, and maybe things will change and I will improve, or I might just change, I don't want to have totally lose myself to the anger. For or if or when I ever do walk again, if until then I am so

distraught with anger, then I will continue to be even after starting to walk. Even though I will then be walking, I would continue to hold that anger. And I don't want my life lost to anger anymore.

I hardly believe myself that I can come to this understanding. Not what I would call common thinking around these parts. Somewhere along the way I came to see that many people around here seem to take umbrage of one kind or another, or just the meaning of living here, or having been part of the losing side of the war that ended more than a century ago, and nurse that annoyance until it becomes a sorrow, and then a distress, and then an affliction, and then a professional self-torturer, so that everything becomes a justification for itself and any other desired attitude or behavior. And after a while, it doesn't seem to matter whatever offense they wish to hold on to, because anything that motivates their desire to be angry justifies itself in their eyes. I don't want to like that, like a permanent victim, like a professional victim.

The pity that people heap upon me, it's disgusting. In their eyes, I see their sorrow designed to solicit, to want me to join in them in a perpetual victimhood. I am not going to live as an emblem of theirs. Yes, there is no getting away from my being being hurt in a personal devastation, in an utmost cruelty. I am living it every hour, every day. And if I chose, I would have every justification on earth to live in the delusion of neutered anger. Whatever I am, whatever afflicts me, whatever is my burden, is not someone else's to harness or participate in. It is me, it is mine, and I refuse to be someone else's neon sign. So now I see clearly why I am best mostly keeping quiet, away from the parade of local underhands. But why did it take such a hideous accident for me to understand how rigid most people are with their opinions?

I cried out to whatever god there is innumerable times, and all I found was my own unending anguish. Those days and weeks and months in the hospital, and every minute of every day in that physical therapy, and on and on after I came home, it was endless heartache and wretchedness. I had no choice of what I am, what happened to me. What kind of choice does one have when your legs are smashed and you now are forced to live atop a motorized wheeled vehicle. I didn't lose my manhood, which is a happy thing, but without legs, I would have to rely only on my arms to move. Hardly appealing I would think. I can't even kick over a damned can. But I found I do have a choice whether to live in wretchedness.

I go downtown sometimes. People who knew me, who know me, sometimes I can stand being around them. New people tend to see my wheelchair, not me. They see I have no legs, not me.

I can hang out at the community center when there is no big event. Just a few folks, all regular folks who I have known for years. That I can sometimes handle. I tried the church, and then a few other churches, but that plastic smile everyone glues on their faces for church, it just makes me sick. As if those church smiles wipe away their behavior elsewhere. As if smiling in church will do something for them. All it does is displays their shallowness and cardboard veneer. There was only one church where I could somehow relax into just sitting there. That preacher, Dan something, as an individual he is okay. When he smiles, he is not trying to pour his religion all over you. It was the way he spoke to me that got me out of my darkest place. Got to hand it to him, he was helpful without being pushy. Probably the only one who could do that then. He asked me if I would help him. I was wary, but I was open enough to listen. Later it turned out he wanted some help for a new immigrant family trying to learn English. Dan says that some people were not friendly or were even hostile to them.

3

A man. Not many words do I want to speak, think. Keep it short, keep it straight, and avoid ... avoid ... just avoid what I want to avoid. Getting one foot in front of the other, putting in the hours to keep ... keep what ... keep it all together. Once I went off to work, and brought enough home weekly, enough for a family to live on, to support them. Raise kids, have my wife, have this house. And now... not so simple or easy now. So much of it lot. Francie died. Paul crippled. Robbie lost..., I don't know what with Robbie. And me laid off. Not a pretty world.

Everyone calls me Westy. That's enough. I no longer got use of a first name. Have three children, all grown now. Had a wife but she passed. Nowadays I must scramble to get by, even with the three grown. Wouldn't want to say too much, but Mary's the star. She's the quiet one, but the shining star. A graduate degree, something in science but it's beyond me. And a good, stable job. She earns a fair living, far more than I ever did, and the money she sends saves us, all of us, even if she doesn't live here much these days. After my layoff, not easy to make ends meet up. A few days here, a few days there, everyone who worked at the plant is just scrounging. Like we'll all competing for whatever few odd jobs there are around.

Would never have thought, back before, that I'd be happy for a few days a month at the garage working on motors, a few days driving a truck three hundred miles and back. When I see any of the guys from when I worked at the plant, most of us are just doing the same. Not much doing around, and don't seem like prospects will look up in any time soon. Keeping me ears open, always looking. It's tough... looking, asking. Being a foreman at the plant back then, having that kind of responsibility and whatever came from all those years. I think back and I remember some kind of strength in those times.

At one time they all were happy to work in my group. "Hey Westy!" they would call from across the shop floor as I walked by. It took me a short time to see that no other manager or boss got that kind of familiarity. It irked some of the bosses, but they knew they needed me, they knew no one else could take on the foreman's work. Well, that was then.

I'm here and taking care so Paul has a roof, and the house is open for my children. It's what a man does. Even if I don't want to think too much about it. So it is something I must do, maintain the house, the home. Not just for Paul, but for Paul too. He went through a bad time after the accident, understandable, and so did we all. Understandable. I was afraid for him, but he keep to himself now. Like I do, I guess.

Maybe it's for the best I was laid off when the plant closed. I don't think I could be back there after what happened to Paul. When they first announced the plant was going to close, it was all we could think about. These days are different in that we did get some notice, it was different back in the old days. While we were crating up the equipment, it was a truck from the plant that ran right into Paul's pickup.

The rest of my time employed was me being on leave with Paul in the hospital. The plant closed while I was out with Paul. With the lawyer's help, we won some money and Paul's medical expense were paid by the company. I still feel bad about the truck driver, they had to pay too, and I knew him from the

plant. But it was something that had to be done, since Paul ending up the way he did. We still have some of that money, and it still is for Paul, his physical therapy and medical visits and so on.

Don't want to dwell on things. I refuse to look at, to think if I am happy. Happy is the past, and what it was. No one wants to lose their wife and live from hand to mouth. No one wants a son crippled. A man's job is to work and if possible work his land. That is all.

4

"Here's your key," Merle Jacks said, "Room 3. Out the door, to your right." Merle, a stooped man with a downtrodden expression, wore a faded brown shirt with a small name tag.

"Breakfast in the morning?"

"Coffee's on here in the lobby at all times. You can catch a breakfast at the Timely Diner down the road. They're open 24 hours."

"Thanks."

As he left the lobby, Merle picked up the phone. "Just checked in. Name is Kenner. Right. Bye."

Once Kenner left the small office, Merle sat down again. He was self-conscious of the curvature of this back. He tried to ignore it when interacting with others, but he was troubled. No matter how he behaved towards others, he always saw others seeing him through the prism of the shape of his back.

Like this latest guest. This Kenner guy. Not as ramrod as a general, but still a man with some sort of military background. Even more perpendicular than that deputy guy, what was his name? Yes, I think his name is Mills or Mill or something.

The parking lot was filled with semis. Kenner closed the door to his room. At least there were the basics. A television, a clock. It was one of those rooms that you felt comfortable relaxing in unless you thought about it too much. He hit the bed, closed his eyes. Then it was the alarm. Ugh, 5:00 a.m. already. On to his feet, into the shower. Out the door.

"Coffee," the waitress said as he sat down at the counter, pouring without waiting. The place was half-filled, truckers, locals. Voices wandered over, pieces of conversations clipped each other.

Sirens wailed as fire trucks roared by. A new arrival announced, "Road's closed going south. Freight train hit a semi." Everyone froze as a silence choked the room. Most of those present were truckers, and the news was about one of their own. A few slowly looked around, mentally taking attendance of those they recognized.

The TV over the counter, the morning news, was showing flames and flashing lights, police and firemen.

He ate his eggs in silence. Didn't seem right to ask too many questions, not with the accident in motion. He'd stop by at another time when things were quieter and slower. More likely then for a waitress to feel more comfortable chatting.

5

"Ladies and Gents," Gabe Henders said, "You all know me. Before our main speaker and guest of honor, arrives today, I want to remind you about where strength and power should be. It is in the land, our land, for those who grow food. For those who farm and grow food for ourselves and for this nation." He waited a moment, then continued.

"We inherited our customs and tradition from Great Britain. And where was the power in Great Britain? For centuries it in was in the farms and in the land. Those who grew the food in Britain had political power. The laws favored British *domestic* farming. And so should we in our country..." And he went on. And on.

Gabe Henders knew what he knew, and he knew he was stretching the truth. He also knew that his audience would not know anything about the history of farming in Britain, or even understand that the import restriction in Britain of those times were designed to favor the aristocracy, and most who grew grains in Britain were tenant farmers, hardly more than serfs. But half-truths favored his argument, so he never hesitated to use what he could.

"Let's look at some history. At one time, being a farm owner, land owner in Britain was a guarantee to become wealthy. The population of Britain needed food, and they got it from their local farms. Food, needless to say, was always in high demand. This is before the mass importing of food. As a result of high demand and few other supplies of food, anyone owning farmland became rich. The farmers provided the labor, and were able to make a good living. And tariffs on imported food kept out any competition.

"Since things seemed to be going great, when British tariffs were repealed. After the American Civil War, American farming increased substantially, farming machinery substantially improved so more could be planted and harvested, the building of the railroads made transportation of food much easier and faster. So food into Britain imports soared.

"As a result, the prices of food dropped in Britain, and local farmers could not compete with imported food. Farmers gave up farming and moved to the cities to find jobs in the factories. Landowners no longer were able to collect rent from their farmland. Britain became dependent on imported food.

"Why am I telling you this? Are we, nowadays so dependent on imported food we are going to go bust? No, it isn't that way. In Britain, food production was the cornerstone of jobs in its day. Just like manufacturing has been here in the US. At least until lower prices of imported goods killed our factories. Did you know the U.S. used to have tariffs?"

Then Henders announced, "Our guest of honor and main speaker tonight has arrived. Let me introduce the man you all know, Don Fontana!" Applause.

Fortuna strode to the front of the room, smiling. The lights were dimmed as Fortuna came to the front. "Thank you Henders." He realized what he had just said, and quickly said "Mr. Henders. A fine job you are doing." Then he turned to the crowd and commenced his speech. It was obvious to several in the audience he had practiced and rehearsed this speech before.

Robbie sat in the back of the room. He was always surprised how the room just seem transformed when the group met. This community room, the community center, was used for dances, classes of all kinds, music contests, a quilting group, but when this group met, it was like another place. He liked, if only for a moment, to be away from all the other activities, and be aware.

"Then China and Mexico took our factories and stole our jobs!" Fortuna called to the room. Applause met his words.

"Did you know the U.S. used to have tariffs?"

"Before World War I, tariffs were the major source of government revenue. Did you know that the purpose of tariffs was to promote our industries? They were the reason we were able to have an industrial revolution. And it was the industrial revolution that made America strong and powerful.

"Now we have so-called 'Free Trade.' Why is it called free trade? So that it would sound benign, useful. Who doesn't like "free"? If we called it by some other names, like 'Freedom to Export Factories' or 'Unrestricted Export of American Money' or 'Flood America With Cheap Goods', then we would have a different attitude towards it.

"And what is free trade anyway? It is the supposed unrestricted import and export of goods. It means that the rich can move money to avoid taxes. Build factories overseas with cheap materials and cheap labor to flood America with cheap goods. If we cannot protect American factories and American jobs, we have lost our own land to rich factory owners and foreign factory workers. They have exported our jobs and exported our opportunities. What do we have left?

"Once, our nation looked upon itself as blessed by god. We were a holy nation, looking to god for our guidance. Now things have changed. Now... "

Fortuna went on, but Robbie had stopped listening. He had heard much of this before, from Fortuna and Henders. Robbie liked the idea of someone protecting jobs and economy. It was important to have jobs. How didn't understand why things got bad.

He just didn't understand how things happened. People who had jobs hated their jobs, but if they didn't have a job they hated not having a job. Where did people get to bounce from one end of opinion to the other without getting dizzy. He closed his eyes. He felt dizzy too.

He thoughts drifted home. Brother in a wheelchair, spends too much time by himself, then out elsewhere, sister in some corporate science work and gone most of the year. Father works, or tries to at least. He supposed he felt happy enough that they didn't get on his case. In fact, he couldn't remember

the last time someone at home asked him what he was going to do with himself now that he was finished with high school. So many other families he knew had their young men at home, not much to do. Some tried growing some crops, others joined the navy. One or two of his classmates upped moved West. Another got himself hired by the Norfolk Southern. Once in a while Robbie asked himself 'what the hell am I going to do?'

He heard applause again, and Robbie brought his attention back to the room. People were standing up, and the speech part of the meeting was obviously ending. Several people stood around in small groups and talked. He stood up. Two or three new faces.

"Kenner is my name," a new face said.

"Robbie."

"I live a few hours down the interstate, just dropped by to see what goes on. Good speech, huh."

"Yeah. He's good."

"Is Thursday the only time for this meeting?"

"All I know of, but Fortuna might know more."

"Great. Can you introduce me?"

"Sure," said Robbie, and together they made their way to the front of the room.

6

"Look I know ya know I spent some time, and did my time" said Wayne Densin.

"Yes, Wayne, I know," Fortuna replied.

"Now things are different. Now I am doing something, believing in something. Believing that we need to protect ourselves. That is why I am here with you."

"Yes, Wayne. No one doubts your commitment."

"Well, what I want to tell you is that I recognized someone in the crowd today."

Fortuna waited.

"Since I was, uh, involved with the, uh, justice system. I saw a familiar face."

Wayne went on. "Took me some time to 'member where I saw him. Then it came to me. State investigator. A friend tells me he is staying at the motel."

"Which one was he?"

"I noticed him because he spoke to you after."

"Hmm. Said he name was Kenner," Fortuna said quietly. Then he remembered who introduced him. That kid, Robbie. Was there a real connection or accidental?

Robbie has been coming for a year, usually a solid participant, sometimes a little excitable, young, impatient, impatient to learn. Was he someone now to be wary of? Was there some sort of investigation brewing?

"Keep an eye on that Robbie kid," Fortuna said.

Wayne nodded. He didn't say anything. He knew he didn't need to told any more. He knew what he would have to do if Fortuna gave the word.

7

"And we're looking into the domestic side of this. The threat level is low, but we continue to look into it," Johnston said.

"What are the circumstances?" asked the Major.

"Shared internet connection at a local community center. There is a resettled refugee family in the area, but also some other local characters, both savory and unsavory, some of which have a past or have agendas. Since the threat of violence is low, no full court press for now."

"Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

8

Robbie screamed, "Paul!, what the hell is this freakin *foreign language*?"

"Not every language on earth is English."

"Paul, what the _hell_ is this freakin language?"

"I think you should calm down, Robbie. What are you getting so unbearable about?"

"You're learning how to be a goddamn foreigner! Off to the moon next? We're here in god's America, and your learning some foreign language!"

"You calm down." Paul had left a notebook open on his desk and Robbie had started to thumb through it. "You calm down. Where did this attitude come from? You're just making yourself nuts."

"I can't take it Paul! We're here in the best country on earth and you want to get into something like this? We've let them stab us in the back and bleed our jobs away, and you want to warm up to some foreign country?" Robbie ripped a few pages from the notebook and stormed off.

"Robbie!" Paul yelled, but he was gone. There was no telling these days what would tick off Robbie. That Robbie cared about the economy was that much more puzzling to Paul. That Robbie would not listen to him, that Robbie took Paul's notebook as some evidence of some conspiracy on his part was baffling. Paul just shook his head.

Outside, Robbie ran until he could not run any longer, out of breath, crying. Damn foreign languages were about to takeover his country, his town, now his family. *They took his father's job when the factory closed. Everyday the news was filled of factories closing, jobs moving away, somewhere else, away, away from home. I'd better tell Fortuna about this, he would be able to help. He'd be able to do something.*

9

"My brothers, 'iikhwani, let us never forget that we are guests in this country.

"Let us look at recent history. The bloodshed that erupted when Sunni and Shia became enemies has crippled Islam. Who wants to live in a country where, at any moment, bombs will kill your family? Who would want to become a Muslim if the only prospect for your future is that you are killed by a fellow Muslim? This is not living.

"Spectacular methods of destruction bring down calamity upon all of us. Attacking symbols, like foreign buildings and airplanes, appeal to the uneducated and immature, for it is the appeal to uneducated and immature that brings out the worst in humanity. The violence that appeals to uneducated and immature brings nothing constructive; it yields more violence and more destruction, never-ending.

"Look at recent events in America. The appeal to the poorly educated and immature made a poorly educated and immature man their leader. His behavior shows he believes in violence. He cannot change.

"No, I reject such unthinking violence.

"Let us, my brothers, look at where we want to be. We are guests in this country. It has provided us with a respite. But it is a temporary respite, and while the country we are in has been hospitable, it is not our home. We yearn to return to our own country free and devout.

“But I must tell you, although our teachings call upon us all to jihad, if we use jihad as the aim for the endless destruction of others, it will bring endless misery and destruction upon us, as it has already. So I tell you that jihad must be upon ignorance and backwardness. For what do we send our sons to madrass? So they can suicide and kill in so doing? We have wasted their young lives and their future, and the future of Islam, if the aim is to die that way. Paradise is not attained by suicide. It is attained by strength and prosperity and peace.

“I know many will disagree. Some will disagree violently. Many will point to the violence perpetrated against Muslims everywhere as reason and justification for violence. This may be.

“Are we to be locked into violence after violence forever? Do we stop ourselves from teaching our children because we are angry? Has jihad replaced everything else in Islam?

“So let us aim ourselves to a different goal. Our goal is to become strong in whatever country we reside. It is in the acts of being prosperous and strong that we attain our goal. Let us therefore go forth and educate our children, provide for the health of the population, and let each person become industrious in their own best way.”

10

“Oh, these florescent lights....” The same thought came to him every morning as he arrived. And every morning he forgot about it once he got to his desk. Derk approved of his presence at this job. Got to wear a suit everyday in an air conditioned office, not like his father. No factory grease and dust and grime on a pair of overalls. No fear of company closing a plant. Not trying to stay awake behind the wheel of a belching noisy truck. When times got tough, no needing to go from a factory worker to a truck driver. And now he was supporting his parents, after his father's accident.

He didn't like to dwell on his parents' circumstances. Nobody likes being sued. It was the only time he saw his father cry. The company's insurance was not sufficient, so Derk Sim's father had to declare bankruptcy. Nor would he, Derk, ever speak about it in the office; despite half his salary going to support his parents. Something told him that it would not reflect well on his position. Derk turned his attention back to his work. In this job, he got to look into the secrets of lives of other people, people elsewhere, people halfway around the world. The suited Derk just fine, better to delve into foreign lives far away than those closest to him.

Despite their suits, or maybe because of them, all employees were required to wear security badges and keep them visible at all times. He needed to swipe his badge and use the fingerprint sensors for access to most every doorway and device, multiple times a day. Never gets old, he told himself.

Like dozens of others in the building, their beat was the Middle East and South Asia. Telephone intercepts were run through automated translations. The volume of calls was staggering, so software filtered and categorized everything. The constant fear was of the “in retrospect it was obvious” syndrome, and that software would not flag something that a human could have seen it easily enough. While those battles were constantly being fought and refought, the surges of incoming data was so great, Derk once estimated that even if the entire population of the U.S. was recruited to monitor all the

incoming data, there would never be enough people to process, review and correlate everything. So while others debated whether software should be allowed to be the main determinant of threats, in effect software was what ran the place.

"If they only knew what we knew about them," he once had laughed to his supervisor-coworker Johnny. Johnny Tried laughed back, "Ain't that the truth!" But they both knew how strict the office was about banter and the potential for inadvertent security leaks, so they rarely let any personal attitude slip into their discussions. In the office it was strictly business.

Once in a while he bounced between being surprised at how much information he could access from his desk, to being surprised how simple and easy it was. That he could find out the telephone numbers, both calling and receiving, of every phone call in Pakistan, or India, or Afghanistan, just about anywhere. He could easily see any person's life connections. All received or initiated phone calls, all text messages, all banking transactions, all call phone location data, employment history, family trees, associations and connections. Within just a few moments delay he could build a visual map of all connections between any two or more people or groups.

Much effort went into tracking groups. Who joined, where they met, how they acted, the money flow, the connections and relations to other groups. It was simple to sketch an intimate portrait of multiple groups.

Sometime he wondered if those people knew that so many people were tracking everyone. Were other countries doing the same? Were there groups in China, Russia, Europe, and elsewhere that tracked the same people? Once day he wondered 'Were there groups in those other countries tracking everyone in the U.S.?' but dropped that thought immediately; it was too disturbing to think about.

The best part about this place, he thought, is the lack of noise. No alternate views, no televisions. Everyone was on the same page about what they were doing and why. Or at least it seemed. There were enough opinions and discussions about the intercepts and data coming in, that no one had interest in spouting off about which way the political winds of the day were blowing.

Johnny has once asked him why he majored in history and foreign affairs when he was in college, but Derk replied offhandedly about wanting to see the world. But he knew better than to admit he was chasing a woman who has signed up for the same major. That relationship did not get anywhere. Years later, Derk found her name online as married to someone with too much money, too many private jets, and several passports.

Johnny arrived shortly after him, and they got to work. Directives on who to track and their non-domestic connections were common requests, and today was no different. Protocol now dictated that multiple teams review all reports and intercepts, and he was glad to be paired with Johnny. It could be a lot worse, he thought to himself. Derk sensed that Johnny came from a more affluent and privileged family than his own. But Derk never felt that Johnny had any judgments about their backgrounds. They both passed all background and security checks, so that was enough for both of them. Derk knew he'd stick it out with whomever they paired him with, and Johnny was fair and competent. Derk... he was glad to be here, and doing his part. Derk knew well enough not to complain; he knew complaining was frowned upon.

"Johnny, take a look at this." By the look on Derk's face, Johnny knew that something was very different. "Turned up in the last hour."

He started to read *"My brothers, let us never forget that we are guests in this country..."*

"Well. This is something different," said Johnny. One of the things Johnny found appealing about Derk was that Derk never was sarcastic or cynical. 'Just the facts, ma'am' kind of guy.

"It certainly is. No appeal to martyrdom, suicide, or any of that." Derk wondered if he was witnessing something bigger than he could put his finger on.

"No attribution?" Johnny noted.

"No," Derk replied. "Turned up on some sweep, but no guidance about an author, or which group. The only thing that stands out that we see on this one is that it is in Arabic, Urdu, and Pashto, which means something is different here. I'll push for better trace on this one. We'll need it."

"I'd like you to bring this up as soon as possible at the group meeting, but it is so one-off that I think we need to wait until either we have some other similar messages, or the origin can be pinpointed with more accuracy."

"Got it," Derk replied.

Johnny never considered he would work anywhere else. As a youngster, it was his dream to work in government. Later, in college, he realized that the world of secrets, the world behind the facades of idealism, was the world for him.

It wasn't a need for financial survival that drove him. His family was well off, and there was money in the trust for them all to buy homes and provide ongoing income. Lucky enough to have a grandfather whose companies owned and ran factories, run utilities, owned land and mineral rights. Johnny knew enough to keep his affluence to himself. Although he never mentioned it, somehow many understood his graduate degree in international relations was from the university ranked number one in the world.

Grandfather's father owned factories before the Depression, he had been told. Some went under, but some had survived. Then when grandfather took over, ran the factories, consolidated them into one company, but when he got older, he later sold everything.

Johnny had traveled with his father and sometimes his grandfather on some of the factory visits when he himself was younger. Places he had only heard about came to life. But his memory was that of out-of-the-way places, places with one factory, surrounded by people with little prospects for other work. Towns with one main employer with a chain of dependency upon that one employer. From which he propelled himself to go to college and graduate school.

And as it was, some time after grandfather sold everything, those factories eventually were closed, were moved, or otherwise allowed to wither. So the isolated attached to the declining were lost. The

momentum of industry had passed by them and their locale. Persons will cling to ideas and fantasies, but it is only unfiltered perception that allows the astute to survive.

Later he knew that with his graduate degree, he had choices. He chose a position of analyst with a secretive government agency. Stories of the Depression were part of his family's lore. Since the family had been well off at the time, the stories told were not the average spoken of elsewhere, in other homes. But there was no sugar coating. He recalled the stories of innumerable unemployed people, many desperate for jobs at those very factories. Other stories told of the desperation for a job, any job, how the Post Office was not considered a desirable employer prior to the Depression, but once it hit, it surprisingly became a desirable refuge. Unfortunately, for the postal employees, salaries even there were cut, and cut again, and again.

"On second thought," Johnny turned to Derk, "let's not wait, show this to Johnston."

12

"Hello, Farid," said Paul as he arrived at Farid's home.

"Ah, Pah-lh, *saalam*," Farid smiled. It was as close to 'Paul' as he could get these days.

He is trying, Paul thought. Some other time to get back to my name. For now, I need focus on the practical. He's done pretty well on remembering some nouns, despite his pronunciation.

It had taken a while for them to warm up to each other. With some prodding from Dan, they both stuck to it. Paul had wondered what could Dan, from another religion, could have that made Farid accept his aid. And Farid wondered what could a cripple, a man in a wheelchair, could possibly know or have that could be of any benefit to his family. Later Farid would tell Paul that Dan never spoke of any of his beliefs and just focused on helping Farid and family. Dan later told Paul that Farid no longer thought of him as a man in a wheelchair.

"Father? Brother? Sister?" Farid inquired, "*buh-ub? puh-hai? buh-hen?*" It was common, Paul understood, for social conversation and inquiring after this family, before any lessons. I'd prefer not to reflect on my family; sometimes I wish we didn't have to go there, but that is his culture.

"*Ah-chee!*" replied Paul. "Good!"

After some pleasantries, Paul asked Farid for his notebook and study papers.

Farid pulled out his papers. Paul looked it over.

"Good!" Paul said again, "*ah-chee!*"

Farid smiled.

As Farid has some auto repair background, Paul oriented some lessons towards learning automotive and repair terms. Along with notebooks, Paul brought some auto magazines.

Pointing one under-the-hood picture, Farid looked and said, "*bha-tree*."

"Good again."

I guess I am learning as much Urdu as he is learning English, Paul thought.

Paul once again sensed some stirring from one of the back rooms. Dan had cautioned Paul that Farid was very protective of his wife and daughter, that it might take years before Farid would allow them to mix with Americans. So when Paul saw multiple handwritings on Farid's study papers, Paul knew that the lessons were not only for Farid, but for Farid's wife and daughter. So Paul recorded the lessons so they could be played back after he left, spending particular attention to pronunciation. It was obvious that much effort would be needed on their part.

13

In the hospital, when Paul was first fitted with a wheelchair, he was assigned a social worker who placed him in a small group. Full of rage and angst, it was difficult to participate or even hear anything said. Of the few things, he recalled discussions about what people would see when they encounter someone.

Paul recalled only one other in the group. A slight and small man, bent with an obvious spinal stoop, who said his name was Merle. Paul listened as he talked about how others rarely seem him, only see his shape. Not said, but clearly intended, was the point that friendships and relationships were rare, and initiating them was fraught with emotional and psychological peril, misunderstandings and predetermined expectations.

Obviously, they will see and react to my wheelchair, thought Paul. It would no longer be me that others see, but a mechanical device arranged to compensate for my inability to move my legs. Why do I need to come to this group? His bitterness enveloped him. But he listened.

After the meeting, people started to leave. Paul wheeled over to Merle and said "Thank for saying what you did."

Merle nodded.

"Paul," introducing himself.

"Merle." Merle replied. "It's a long road from here."

Paul nodded. "I'm too consumed with anger to say anything now."

"Later."

14

The next morning, Kenner took the same seat, same waitress.

Settling in to his coffee, he looked around. This is one look into America's workers, he thought. Truckers make the place exist. Well, his job was to find out whatever he could on whatever he was asked. I guess you never know what you'll find. Was kind of unusual for the Feds to ask a state police detective to do some digging when there was only a suspicion. He was a surprised as anyone when word came down of a conceivable connection of rural hill country to turmoil overseas. Nothing advocating violence it was determined, but still, any involvement was enough to follow through.

He knew the federal policy for decades going all the way back to the first director. In Hoover's day, anyone with even a subscription to a foreign magazine was someone to be wary of, a potential suspect, and the name went on a list. Now with encryption and the internet, there was no let up in the suspicion of possibilities. But that was all federal, he was state.

An internet address to investigate was at the local community center. But before he walked in, he wanted to see if he could get some local scuttlebutt. Conversations between the regional office and the local ISP had yielded names and email addresses, so had a good start there. Financial records were pulled and were being checked. His current goal was not to tip off anyone that they were under surveillance.

Later, when he finished eating, and into his second cup, he started talking to the waitress.

"I hear the community center's got much much goin' on."

"Yup," she replied. Her name tag said Sue. "Lotsa groups. Music--guitar, fiddling, uke classes. Saturday nights banjo picking contests or dancing. And a whole buncha groups meet there, I dunno all of em. Mondays got a sewing group and a quilting bee. Coupla' Thursdays got some politicking rabble rousers, tryin to stir up trouble. You one of them stir-up-troublemakers?"

"Hell, nah," he said, "Looking for a place to take the missus once in a while. We're two hours south." He named a town down the state highway.

"Well. there's a sign out front of the place with the schedule. Well, likely see ya there sometime. I like the line dancing Sunday afternoons."

"Yeah, maybe. Thanks," he smiled.

15

"The pastor will see you now," said the secretary.

He went in.

"Thank you, Miss Anders," said the pastor, and closed the door.

"Pastor Owens, my name is Kenner," he showed his ID.

Pastor Dan Owens looked at it briefly. State police identification. "Call me Dan."

"I'd feel more comfortable to call you Pastor. May I assume that our conversation will be confidential?" Kenner said.

"Part of my job is keeping things to myself."

"Good. Actually, I'm not here investigating any crime. Just looking for some background information."

"Go on."

"We understand there is a resettled refugee family hereabouts."

"Yes, I help settle a family here."

"The family that lost a son in the violence there?"

"Actually both of their two sons. They have their one daughter with them. They're learning English and are doing well for the time they've been here. The father has some mechanic skills. After he gets his language skills up, he could do some auto repair work."

"And your opinion of their ..." Kenner just drifted off.

"Opinion of their ... ?" Dan repeated.

"Their potential involvement in ... crime..."

"You mean jihad?"

"Yes. For example."

"I doubt it. It is just the three of them."

"I take it you feel it is a low possibility."

"Lower than low," Dan said. "I have spent many, many hours with Farid, the father. The three of them spend time working on their garden, studying English. They are glad to be away from the mayhem and chaos and death where they came from in the Middle East. They are trying to adjust to the change in culture, but I know they have settled here."

"I think also the loss of their sons changed them. I think any fight they might have had is long gone. They want to be in a new place. They want quiet, and to be safe. And this is their new world. They need time to adjust, but from what I see, this is their new home."

16

Miss Evenly Anders preferred a quiet situation. She disliked the loud and the boisterous. Which is why she appreciated being church secretary. Pastor Dan Owens was anything but rowdy and unruly. To her eyes, he was thoughtful and polite, although she was not party to the private conversations of those he counseled. Of course, she had the front row seat in knowing who visited him. But along with her personal quietness, she was also discreet. That discretion was what made her an appropriate person in that role.

Originally planned to be named Evelyn, a young sibling's mispronunciation just prior to her mother's delivery found its way onto her birth certificate. So she was born and so she was legally named, but to everyone who knew her, she was Eve.

But while by all accounts Eve Anders seemed to live quietly, she also had her other sides. Rarely seen other than alone, she was not lonely. In fact she was quite social in her own way. In her quiet way, she was able to circulate among the like-minded. They preferred their privacy, most not privy would be hard-pressed to see what if anything ever transpired.

17

If he asks me to follow someone, I do. That's what I do. I follow 'em.

Gabe Henders sat and waited. He was told to follow so he did. He never considered that he was a follower himself, a follower of whomever he worked for. Whoever ordered him to do something, that person was his leader and he became the follower. And now, give an order he became the follower of the target of his following.

In the Army, he was happy for assignments. It gave him things to strive for, things to do. No wasted time. The assigned mission, that was all there became once he was assigned. So he carried it over once he was back in civilian life.

Out of the military, things were messier, less clear, more blurred. So it became his goal then, to find people who would assign to him tasks and missions that needed to be done. None of this messy figuring it out for oneself. He did what was needed, he did what was wanted. He got it done, even if not on the up and up. Legal logic never interfered with him. So it became known to those few who needed someone to do some dirty work that Henders could and would do it. He liked to get paid for his work,

but doing what was ordered was almost more important to him than the money he made. The money was a nice after-thought. Doing the needed deed was all.

He preferred action. But not every assignment was action. Some were watching someone. Or following someone. Or getting comfortable in a community. He did what he was told. Find the church. Go weekly. Behave like you belong. So that is what he will do.

But now he sat outside of the community center, waiting watching. The subject of his attention was inside.

18

That evening when Dan reflected back on the conversation with Kenner, he wondered what brought Farid's family to anyone's attention. Do they follow up on every resettled family? On the other hand, Dan was puzzled when later in the conversation the policeman asked some questions about the community center. There were more than two dozen groups who used the community center in one way or another. Was there some connection between someone there and some possibility of violence?

19

I don't mind it at all. My job is so high-stress and high-pressure that I love it. Like when I was in the army. Bark orders, get things done.

I don't call them my prisoners, my inmates, my convicts, my anythings. They are not mine. They belong to the state, and that's that. Yes, I am the warden, but it ends there. I'd rather be known as Bud, but in this job you need some formality. Mr. Newton would be fine, too, but having a title makes some more respectful. Warden Newton seems too much of a mouthful. So just being called Warden was good enough.

I'll be the first to admit there is politics even in the job of warden. There are always people nipping at your heels, trying to grab a bite and bring you down. But I'm up to it.

So I call them *the population*. I might say in an interview, "the population here is rough," or "the population here is calm," or whatever. Calling them *the population* gives me some breathing room.

After being in this job for a while, it calms you down even if there is stress. The most stressful thing is an escape. Then everyone gets up in a panic. An escaped convict is up to no good. While at the

beginning they all think they need to fade away and become invisible, the problem is that after a short while they all succumb to behaving badly. That's when they become dangerous.

In almost all cases they get caught pretty quickly. There is a rare one that evades everything. We like to say they all eventually get caught, but that's not the truth. The rare one is the one who disappears and stays that way. They are the quiet ones who have no desire to harm others. The quiet ones' interest in being free outweighs their interest in any criminal behavior. So while it is a black eye on the correctional system, but off the record I don't take it as a reflection on me. I certainly act like it is a personal affront when it happens, but that's all for show.

About this warden business. Salary's good, especially for this part of the world. Local town has a few things to recommend it, and the locals are a decent bunch. Many of them seem to realize that the prison is a good employer, and that employees spend money.

20

"My dog was going wild, so I followed him. Then I saw it."

"OK, Freddie." Deputy John Mill drew closer. A form was visible but its face was hidden under the leaves and brush. Slowly, he lowered his arm and touched the back of the neck. Cold as ice. Definitely dead. God, he hated dead ones.

"OK, thanks for letting me know, Freddie. I need to call it in. Keep yourself around case there are any questions."

"Sure, John."

Mill radioed his station. "10-20, off River Road, two miles south of the community center. 10-18, got a 10-79, 10-100."

"10-4, 10-23," was the reply.

21

"Single shot to the side of the head. Close range too. I'd say the victim probably knew the killer." Mill said. Looked like that Robbie kid.

"Let's get 'em back to the morgue." Looking closer, the coroner pointed out what looks like some paper in the dead man's hand.

"Yes, I saw it," said Mill. "Be sure not to lose them."

"Once we get him on the slab, we can look at the paper."

"Right, Doc. I'll come by later this afternoon."

"Bloody, but legible."

"Legible if you can read this. Not English. Or anything European, that's for sure. I'll make a copy and send it to the state police headquarters, see what they make of it."

22

"Mill here."

"Mill, this is Kenner, state police. Got your request to decipher the writing on some evidence."

"Yes..."

"No one at headquarters could recognize it, thought it might be Arabic, but it wasn't. So we had to go to the state university and check some professors of foreign languages. Thing's come back as written in Urdu."

"Urdo?"

"Urdu."

"Where is this language from?"

"We asked the same questions. Turns out mostly India and Pakistan. Between the two there are about 160 million native speakers."

"160 million?"

"Yup."

"160 million people in the world speak a language I never heard of. Hmm."

"That should narrow it down for you."

"Not so funny when there's a cadaver involved."

"Yes, I know. It's a homicide, and you caught it. But we are definitely on it as well. I should give you a head's up that the word is going to come down that we're taking the lead on this one."

"Well, have at it. I knew the moment I saw the victim that this seemed more than just another Hatfield and McCoy."

"Yes. You're local there so I need to leave it to you to inform the family."

"Yes. We'll take care of it. I spoke to the captain this morning. It will be three of us going down there this afternoon."

"I see."

"I'll see you when you get back here."

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow it is."

23

Her phone rang.

"Mary," Paul said.

"Paul," Mary knew that Paul would never call for anything not serious. Bad news it must be. Did their father...

"You need to come home."

"Sure, Paul. What...?"

"It's Robbie. He's been killed."

"Oh my God," Marty felt her heart drop. She grasped the chair and closed her eyes. Tears came, she felt her voice crack, "I'll be home on the next flight."

24

"Mill. You are the local knowledge, so we're going to need your cooperation," Kenner said.

"Sure, you got it," Mill replied.

"Glad to hear that. Not too comfortable, but I think we should keep our eyes open at the funeral."

"I'm on the same page," said Mill. "Got the video guy down from the state capital to record everyone who comes."

"Good. Let's go over what we know."

"We pulled the victim's financials, phone records. Started canvassing his last classmates, see who saw him in the last few weeks."

"Good."

"When we went to notify the family, I sat down with his older brother, name is Paul. In a wheelchair from when two trucks hit him, back when the plant closure was in motion. Anyway, it seemed of late our victim was hot under the collar about the economy, foreigners, things like that. Seemed to puzzle Paul, since it seemed unlike him."

"Under the influence of some other hotheads likely."

"Yes, I would suspect. There's a group that meets at the community center trying to stir up that kind of resentment."

"Fortuna's group."

"Yes, you know it?"

"Yes, I dropped in on them a while back. Actually I saw our victim there."

"Oh. Were you on to something then?"

How much should I share with Mill? thought Kenner. If I hold back everything and things come out later, Mill won't be too pleased.

"State was asked by some Feds to check around about a resettled family hereabouts."

"The Farid family?"

"You know them? Yes, that's them."

"I know them because that pastor Dan Owens made a point of wanting to introduce me to him personally."

"I see," said Kenner.

"In those kinds of countries, police are often seen as mainly bribe-extortionists. Dan wanted Farid to know things are different here, and not to be afraid to call for help if he needs it."

"Have you seen him much?"

"At first I was there frequently, accompanying Pastor Owens to help them shop, and so on. Now I stop there every few months. Every time Farid sees me he freezes, then warms up a little more each time."

"And your opinion of him and family?"

"Quiet. The last thing they want is trouble or to make it either. You know they lost their two sons to violence before coming to the U.S."

"Yes. And they speak Urdu?"

"Yes."

"And it was Urdu on the paper in the victim's hand."

"I see," said Mill.

"The report came back yesterday from State that the language was Urdu. But the writing was not from a native speaker, I mean not written by someone whose first language is Urdu. The report said the handwriting was likely a Westerner's handwriting, someone learning the language."

"So the upshot so far is that Robbie took the paper from someone who is learning Urdu, and that person shot him, or he later encountered someone else who shot him."

"I would go with the latter point. If the shooter was the one learning Urdu, then the shooter would have retrieved the paper. What I see here is he was shot by someone else he knew."

"Sounds plausible. Let's head back to that pastor and ask a few more questions. Like if he knew who is learning Urdu. I'd guess Farid would know the answer to that more than anyone, but I wouldn't want for him to clam up if he sees two cops. My only interactions with so far have been social."

"Yes, let's hold off on Farid for now. If we need to approach Farid for information we can do it later. Maybe get the pastor to smooth the way then, if it comes down to it."

25

"Funeral's tomorrow," said Mill. "I've know the family for some years, and we broke the news, so I'll be there. We might notice something or someone."

"I'll observe from outside," replied Kenner. He knew it was an advantage to have someone to watch who goes in and out, and who hangs back.

26

The parking lot was full, and a later arriving cars were parked on both sides of the road. A deputy was directing traffic. "Weddings and funerals," said Mill as he got out of the car.

Kenner drove past and turned around to park with a good view of the church entrance. He saw Pastor Dan's car in the now-filled parking lot. Mostly young men, a few with their parents. Probably classmates and friends, though Kenner.

Momentarily, a newly arriving car stopped midway between Kenner and the church, and Kenner recognized Fortuna as he stepped out. Fortuna spoke briefly to the driver, and went into the church. The driver parked in an open spot, and turned off the engine. Stepping out to light a cigarette, the driver leaned against his car.

Kenner watched the driver. Something familiar about the driver held his attention. Kenner pulled out his phone, and snapped a few shots of the driver, then uploaded them. Dialing, he spoke to a technician who promised to run a check on the uploaded photos within fifteen minutes.

The driver didn't budge from his car, smoking, waiting. By the time the technician called Kenner back, Kenner had remembered where he had seen the driver. And who it was.

27

An hour later, the road was full of mourners leaving the church and driving off, Fortuna included.

"Anything interesting?" asked Kenner when Mill returned to the car.

"Lots of kids. Mostly high school classmates and pals of the deceased. Some community members. That Pastor, Dan Owens, ran the service. And that refugee Farid who speaks Urdu was there. And I did see one of the local rabble-rousers from the community center."

"That must have been Fortuna," said Kenner. He waited a moment and said, "While I was waiting, I saw someone who I'd seen before. Guy named Wayne Densin. Wayne is who drove Fortuna. Wayne has a past. I helped put him away sometime back."

"That *is* interesting."

"I know his past, but I want to know of his latest whereabouts before talking to him. I'll run a search on him when we get back to the station."

28

After the funeral, the procession to the cemetery. Mill and Kenner followed. A small group congregated at the grave site. Mill pointed out the family of the deceased. Father, brother in the wheelchair, sister. A few elderly distant relatives. Dan Owens officiated. No one else had accompanied them.

Three hours later, Mill and Kenner returned to the church and met with Dan. While Dan had known Mill for some years, it was the second time Dan met with Kenner, and the first time Dan saw them together.

"Local and state together," Dan noted.

"Yes. Unfortunately, the circumstances of a homicide changes the situation," Mill offered.

"Certainly," Dan replied.

"We're not aiming at the Farid family unless they were involved," Kenner replied.

"I wouldn't conceive of them getting mixed up in this kind of business."

"They speak Urdu."

"Yes. Paul has been tutoring them in English."

"Anyone hereabouts learning Urdu?"

"Paul has been picking it up to help him tutor Farid."

"Ah," said Kenner. "Anyone else attempting Urdu that you know of?"

"No."

"Thanks for your time, pastor." Mill said, and with that they left.

29

"So Robbie seems to have picked up some papers his brother is using to learn Urdu, and has them in his hand when he gets shot."

"Looks like it."

"We'll need to speak to Paul again."

"Not unusual to go back to a family after a homicide to try to pin down more facts," Mill said, "but I'd like to give it a day or two, leave them alone. They just had the funeral."

"I see your point," said Kenner. "Two days, then let's go back there."

30

"We're sorry for your loss," Mill said when he, Kenner and Paul were alone.

Paul barely whispered, "Thank you."

"I know there is never a good time, but to help the investigation, we need to ask a few questions."

Paul nodded, said nothing.

"Your brother had some papers in his hand when he was found. They were in Urdu. You've been studying it we understand."

"Yes," Paul said without looking at them. "I was learning some Urdu to help Farid learn English. Robbie was angry I was learning it. He seemed to have gotten some weird idea that learning something other than English was somehow... bad."

Kenner and Mill looked at each other.

Mill asked, "Bad?"

"Yes, when he saw what I had written in my notebook, it just seemed to set him off. Those nutcases that meet at the community center and screech about America and god. Robbie started screaming and pulled some papers from my notebook and just ran out of the house. And it was the night he was killed."

"Is the notebook still here?"

"Yes, on the table there."

Mill picked it up, and showed it to Kenner. A few pages had been roughly torn from it.

"Can we take this for a time?" Kenner asked. "We'll return it."

31

Pastor Dan Owens never liked having to support his work as a pastor with a workaday job. And ever since he had landed at the Ur Kasdim Biblical Church, his need and desire for other employment diminished. Not that there was much income from his pastoring, because there wasn't. It was small but fairly steady. The area's inhabitants were not affluent, many were poor or close to it. But the expenses in the area were low, so it was not a heavy burden to survive. Among other things, the church provided Pastor Dan a small home, and there was a small income from some land that earlier generations of the churchgoers had donated. So there was enough for Pastor Dan.

And there were the non-monetary donations that arrived. It was not uncommon for food to be brought to the church. Sometimes an elderly parishioner with no living family would leave their home and possessions to the church. At other times, when an elderly member died with no local family, the distant relatives, with no desire to move back, would sometime donate the remainder of the estate, or an old automobile, or the house of the deceased to the church.

So in addition to his ministering, Dan stepped in to dispose of, or otherwise determine what to do with these donated goods. That is how the church over time owned an automobile or a few, had housewares for donating to needy parishioners, had an occasional house to provide for needy a parishioner or a refugee, or miscellaneous tools that the church loaned to its members as needed. Using such a donated automobile, Dan was able to attend many local events. As such he became more widely visible than if he only had his Sunday sermon to be known by.

The church maintained a thrift shop where some donated items were available for sale. A church back room with some storage was now the home of the gift shop. It survived mainly because of two factors. By the geography of the location, the gift shop and its sign was clearly visible from the main road, and because it had its own entrance. Thus, passersby, even without a church affiliation, were drawn towards it; those visitors in search of local antiques and local flavor found its contents inviting.

Sales activity was expectedly slow and intermittent, but Dan believed it served several purposes. In addition to a source of funds, however small, and a place for unwanted items to be housed instead of being sent to a dump, it also was an opportunity for the church to provide employment to a few high school students over the years. Occasionally, a student would gravitate to a closer relationship to the church, and stay on after graduation as a more permanent employee of the thrift shop. One such person was Brenda Hankins.

"Good morning, Brenda!"

"G'Morning, Mr. Pastor Dan."

"No need for the 'Mister'," Dan replied.

"Just wantin' to be polite. I'm cleanin' out and organizin' the back room, puttin' more on display."

"That's good work, Brenda," Dan said.

It was not more than a year prior when the principal of the High School, Randall Harpin, approached Pastor Dan to seek out some activity for Brenda. "I'm worried she'll get into the worst trouble if left on her own, Family life is not good, and she needs some activity. Or she'll be lost to bad influences."

"I'll see what we have," Dan replied, and quickly added Brenda to the gift shop staff.

Over the next two years, Brenda took on more responsibility, eventually become the main gift shop employee. To everyone's surprise, she went on to graduate high school. Periodically, a young man or two was seen coming by to see Brenda, but for most of the time, she seemed comfortable with her responsibilities. She had moved from her parents home, and lived alone closer to the shop.

Periodically other high school students volunteered for the shop, and Brenda, now being the lead employee, taught and mentored them. From time to time Brenda was seen with different young men, mostly from the high school. But after a while, high school age boys were no longer in her sights, and

some of the boys she had been in class with, also now a little older, usually found hanging out in the town, were seen with her.

32

Ladies of the Quilt was the name they gave themselves. They met weekly, quilted, sewed, gossiped, talked. It was a chance to socialize without much interference, without men listening. To no one's surprise, quilting was not the only topic of conversation. Aside from sewing and the like, the particulars of numerous area men was a common subject.

Informally, and almost unconsciously, the group seemed to separate into the married and the unmarried. A wife complaining about her husband did not want to seemly disparage her spouse in the presence of single women, least the man was seen as "available" based on the wife's negativity. So, at times, it was in subtle hints and knowing glances that the married women spoke of their marriages. They were more forthright with each other should it be an evening where only married women attended.

There were some exceptions to the married-unmarried groupings. Should a single woman be seen for some reason as unthreatening, she was acceptable to the marrieds. One such person was Miss Eve Anders. Although single, she was associated with the church and Pastor Dan Owens. While no untoward behavior was suspected, as there was none, she was seen as "safe." This umbrella of safety that had been bestowed upon her, combined with her natural discretion, made her an easy person to converse with, as she listened intently, revealed little of personal self, and opened an avenue of calmness or even serenity for those who engaged with her.

33

It was a no-shift Saturday for Sue, so she took her time and went home. No quiet like country quiet, she thought, so after a quick meal and a few phone calls to some friends, she went off to meet them at the community center. Tonight there'll be some music and some dancing likely.

"Sue, Sue," Brenda called to her. The musicians were in full swing, so any talking in the room was shouting.

"Hey Brenda, how are you?"

"Oh just fine. No excitement at a church thrift shop. But I got my eye on a few guys here."

"You always have too many guys," Sue said.

"Oh, you gotta live, girl!"

"So who's on your list today?"

"You'll see!"

Music caught them and soon they were asked to dance. A few dances later, Brenda was smiling.

"What's got your tongue?" asked Sue.

"A man asked me out!"

"Brenda, this sounds bad. Never had I heard you say it was a man, always a guy. Is this man an older man?"

She laughed. "Older men have their charms, lady. And sometimes they have some money and a job."

"Well, well," said Sue. "And who is this guy? I mean man?"

"He's a good talker, and you know I like that! And a good dancer!"

"Is your dancer here now?" asked Sue.

"Yes but he just left. Oh, I just get a kick out of how he makes me feel!"

"What is Mr. Talker's name?"

"Oh, it's Wayne. Wayne is just so divine!"

34

"Ballistics report is back on the Robbie Westfall killing," Mill said.

"And?" Kenner asked.

"Ruger," Mill said, reading from the report.

"The LCP?"

"Yes. Report says it's the original LCP model."

"Interesting."

"More interesting is that there's a match for the bullet."

"Really? Go on."

"Looks like was used in an armed robbery five years ago. Single bullet discharged, but missed the intended victim. Oh, and listen to this, the perpetrator was caught and is currently serving time. But the weapon was never found."

"Maybe we caught a break. Time for a visit, wouldn't you say?" Kenner noted.

35

"Have you seen Brenda?" Pastor Dan asked.

No one had seen Brenda in some weeks. Dan checked with Randall Harpin at the high school, but no sightings.

The gift shop ran on as usual, the volunteers kept it open, sold items, accepted donations.

Her parents had not seen her in some months, Dan found. But then, they were not on regular speaking terms anyway. Finally, Dan approached Deputy John Mill.

"It's been some four or more weeks," Dan said, filling out the form.

"OK, I'll start some inquiries," Mill replied.

Well known in town, Mill quickly found the several of the young men who had kept Brenda Hankins company over the last two years.

Then by his count there were several who no longer were local, had moved on or moved away. Most, if not all, had motorcycles, and the local repair shops had enough information to pinpoint license plates, registration data, last known local addresses, and so on, to be able to continue his lead chasing.

36

"Pastor Dan Owens."

He presented his ID. The guard looked at his list. "OK, step in here."

It was always the same, thought Dan. Whether it was a new guard or one he'd seen a hundred times before, the routine was the same. And as it should.

Dan did as instructed. He emptied his pockets into a small plastic tray. Like an airport, he thought. Because he was going somewhere far from normal daily life. He stepped through the metal detector. Thankfully, no beeping this time. Once in a while he might forget to remove something metallic from

his clothes, and be faced with the prospect of additional scrutiny. But that quickly gets old, so thereafter he made sure to be thorough the first time.

The formalities continued. Once he passed the metal detection area, his identification was checked more carefully. Video cameras photographed all comers.

"Put your right hand on the glass." A minute later, "Now your left hand." The prison was now scanning fingerprints of all visitors when entering and leaving. To prevent someone from donning the clothes of a visitor and attempting to escape, finger scans of everyone leaving were matched to everyone who came in. That replaced a previous system of weighing visitors upon entering and leaving. It had been assumed that they might be able to catch anyone attempting to escape by comparing unexpected weight gain or loss during the course of a visit. But finger scans seems simpler, and had the added bonuses of occasionally catching someone wanted for something else, and adding numerous persons to the state's library of fingerprints.

The routine done, Dan was brought to the visitors waiting room. Dan was used to waiting, especially in the prison waiting room. Sometimes he thought his job in life was to wait. Being one of the few designated prison chaplains, he had long accustomed himself to the wait game.

He always brought a bible with him for his prison visits. This time was no different. But he rarely read the bible anymore. It was more for the prisoners, some felt soothed by him reading some passages to him. Others seemed to want to see he had one with him. Hopefully it confirms my bona fides, he thought.

Sometimes he knew who he would be seeing, but on some visits, like today, he waited for the list. Prisoners were able to request a visit with clergy, and their names went on a list. Then he was given a copy of the list when he arrived. Not like speed dating, he thought, speed counseling maybe more like it.

He knew there were bounds on his behavior. He had been warned when he first became a chaplain at the prison that relaying messages for prisoners was forbidden, and he abided by this regulation, most of the time.

When he was new, he found himself being tested repeatedly by the inmates he visited. *Can you bring me a book? Can you bring me a package from my sister? Can you bring me the gift my son has for me?* And so on. He had to be firm and resolute. As much as he wanted to be accepted, as much as he wanted to be sought after by those imprisoned, he knew he could not do it. *You know I cannot do that*, he would say. *You know if I did that I will soon be sitting here in the cell next to you*, and on it went for some time. But, eventually, they learned he was not open to their appeals. His reaction, though, was an increase in his compassion for them. Without the normal means of communication with the rest of the world, they needed to approach and attempt to use all the resources available, and he was one of those resources.

It was on rare occasions that he broke that rule regarding messages, usually only when someone, a prisoner or a relative, was near death and wanted to connect with their loved one. He found himself phrasing messages in general terms, such as "I am sure they wanted you to know..." or "It is my sincere belief that they..."

A guard approached. "Good Morning, Charles," said Owens.

"Good morning reverend. I mean pastor."

"You say that every time," replied Owens.

"And I mean it too," laughed Charles.

If that's a joke, it gets tiresome, thought Owens. But I'll let it go. The prisoners were at the bottom of the heap, but I'm sure guards get bored too.

Owens followed Charles Butte into a smaller meeting room.

"Here's the list. I'll bring the first one around," Charles said, "Billy Johnson."

37

And Dan's natural confidentiality would normally have been an asset towards Eve's interest. However, discretion was not always the only criteria in her mind. She also considered what the potential for the "after." While she normally had total confidence in her abilities to conjure up obvious non-compatibility issues after a quick coupling, she hesitated when it came to Dan. There were so many factors she felt she needed to consider in this kind of situation.

She wondered if he would see through her arrangement with herself to avoid any commitments. For herself, she would just enjoy a brief intimate moment. But Dan was a different kind of person. She suspected he might be perhaps a bit too perceptive of her activities and motive. And not only that, she worked for him. So she kept her distance.

Anyway, she liked her position of church secretary. She felt like an eagle, perched on high, keeping her own counsel, seeing who comes and goes.

38

The gates of State Prison are not the most formidable presence of the prison. Rather, the several rows of concentric high concrete walls surrounding the entire complex is what envelopes the eyes. The walls had become well known ever since the prison administrators decided that circulating pictures of

foreboding walls might make for a good deterrent. With an unsaid agreement, photos of the outer walls were published in newspapers state-wide accompanying most any story about any suspect being convicted of a felony. Whether that worked as a deterrent or an advertisement for concrete was never determined. But as any inmate knows, walls never prevent the determination to escape.

Kenner and Mill, with Kenner driving this time, approached the north gate. Kenner had called ahead to arrange a visit to inmate G-553443, named Billy Johnson. Johnson was on his second stint as an inmate.

Kenner and Mill showed their identification at the front gate, and after surrendering their weapons, a guard led them to the assistant warden's office. They had waited about five minutes when an ominous warbling started. It was obvious from the alarm that some emergency had triggered the alarm.

Momentarily a prison official came into the office. "Sorry gentlemen, we'll have to put your visit on hold. Headcount came up short this morning. Until things settle down, we can't allow anyone to leave the premises. Or come in. This should take about an hour." He quickly left.

"Maybe there's some place to catch a cup of coffee," Mill said.

The guard that had accompanied them from the front gate was outside the office, and walked with them down the hall. He was tall and fit, and wore a sidearm. "Name is Charles Butte. If an escape is verified and I get sent out on the search party, they'll issue me a shotgun," Charles said cheerily.

At the small canteen for employees, they poured themselves some coffee and sat down. It seemed the place had been busy until the alarm went off, and everyone else had left in a haste. Half empty cups of coffee and pastry wrappers had been left on the tables.

The radio on Charles' hip beeped and squawked.

He said, "Looks like we're one man short. You won't be having your interview today."

"What's the procedure now?" Mill asked.

"State Police's been notified. Roadblocks being set up now. The inmates are now on lockdown, until at least they figure out how he flew. I need to take you to the warden's office."

They stood up and returned the way they came in. "The warden's office is through those doors on the left," he said. As they stepped into the office, Charles left them.

Warden Bud Newton was sitting at his desk. Standing on the other side of the room was a uniformed guard. Judging by his insignia, Kenner saw he was likely the highest uniformed officer in the prison.

"Gentlemen, please sit down," said Newton.

They sat down.

The uniformed guard did not speak or move.

"Sorry for the diversion today." Newtown went on, "You'll need to make arrangements for another time. But what was your need in coming today?"

"Billy Johnson," said Kenner. "Seems a weapon he had used in an armed robbery was recently used in an incident that produced a fatality."

"Hmm," said Newton. "He's been here for three years. This time."

"Yes," said Mill. "We knew from the time-line that he couldn't have done this latest incident, but we want to know about the weapon, where he got it from, what happened to it, who else might have known about it or used it."

"Do you have the weapon?"

"No," said Kenner. "The bullets from our victim and one retrieved from the armed robbery match."

"Ah," replied Newton.

The uniformed guard hadn't moved. Nor did he speak. He watched Kenner and Mill.

"Well, normally I'd suggest you return by the end of the week. Unfortunately, it is Johnson who is missing."

Both Kenner and Mill looked at each other, and then at Newton. And then at the guard. Then back to Newton.

"I'd better report back to my office," said Kenner. Looking at Mill he said, "We may both be put on the search party."

"When he's caught and things calm down again, he'll probably be here for a short time. After the investigation into how he escaped is concluded, he'll likely be moved to another locale. That's standard procedure."

"Thanks for your time," said Mill, and the both stood up. Handshakes, and they were gone.

"What do you think?" said Newton.

"They seemed surprised at the escape. So, for now at least, I think they're clean," said the uniform.

"Hmm. You can never be too careful," said Newton. "Be sure to include their visit in the your report."

39

Food and water. These are the hardest things when you want to stay out of sight. Hiding in the day and moving at night is not so hard, if the terrain allows. Here there are enough trees, which is a good thing. I would dread a place with no trees. But needing food and water will quickly slow a man on the run.

Sleep will trip a man if he doesn't plan. The move at night plan means sleep must come in the day. Which means hiding. Scoping a place to rest for some daylight hours. Getting the lay of the land by the sun so as to plan the move at night. No sun at night, so I, Billy Johnson, must plan during the day, then sleep.

Ha, the politics of placing prisons in low population areas means a man can often find a home or trailer unoccupied, and that can mean shelter and maybe food, water, tools, a change of clothes, maybe some money.

All it takes is some time, and the desire to lay low. I once heard a detective say that what usually gives away men on the run is boredom; he said they get bored of hiding and being quiet, so they start taking risks. So I got to keep my head low, and keep patience with myself.

But the greatest advantage a man can hope for is a bunch of freight trains. Passenger trains too hard to hide in, especially if one is not dressed for it, and without a ticket it is can't be done, so freight must be the ticket out. So find the trains, and if I am lucky a place where trains are switched and routed. A slow or stopped train is a man's best friend. Certainly freight trains are watched, but not all of them can be, and in some there are places one can hide. With luck, I'll be hundreds of miles from here in a day or two.

40

Charles the guard was waiting for them outside the warden's office and escorted them back to the front gate and they retrieved their weapons. Everyone they encountered was tense and uneasy.

"Keep your eyes open on the road. There'll be roadblocks. Don't try to evade any of them. Keep your ID handy and easily available, and expect your vehicle to be searched." Charles said. "Raised a few eyebrows you showed up on the same day your inmate flew the coop. I gotta get back." And before they could respond, he was gone.

Mill took the wheel. "Unexpected interrogation by Newton, huh."

Kenner was silent for a moment. "Can't blame the guy. I guess I would have been a little wary of the coincidence myself if I was the warden."

41

"We're interviewing everyone who met with Billy Johnson," said Kenner.

"Yes. I met with him a few times over many months or a year or so. In my role as prison chaplain. Is there some problem?"

"We're doing an investigation. I understand that your conversations with prisoners are confidential. I'd like to ask you if there was any hint or rumor or anything about a plan to escape. Did he ask you for help or advice about escaping?"

Owens sat back and wondered how to reply. His role as chaplain required confidentiality in conversations with prisoners. His position as pastor demanded it. And yet he wanted to remain on good terms with Kenner and law enforcement in general.

"Yes, you are right, I am bound by the rules of confidentiality. As much as I would like to be of assistance, it would place me in great jeopardy if I revealed confidential conversations."

"I understand, pastor," said Kenner. "I would assume you would not hide him should he show up here."

"No, he is not here. I have had no contact with him outside of the prison. Sounds like there was an escape."

"That part we'd like to keep confidential as well. At least until it is announced publicly."

"Certainly. It's the nature of my business, gentlemen, confidentiality." He was glad for an opportunity to remind them that it worked both ways.

42

"Forensics says the paper in the victim's hand was taken from his brother's notebook."

"No surprise then. I would rule out the brother. I can't see him chasing Robbie using a wheelchair."

"Agreed. We should look more at Fortuna. And Wayne as the muscle."

43

She knew that as much as they grieved and cried, they would never be comforted by each other. Paul and his... his... his *chair*. She could no longer see past him as him in his chair. She tried to remember him when they both were young, running through the woods together. But what came to her mind now was him in his chair, the goddamned motorized chair. The time in his pickup also became a quick moment in her remembering, then it was all in his chair.

Robbie. Now this young man, her youngest brother, gone, killed, forever now to be lost, frozen in youth, and she was as devastated as any of them. And Robbie's obsession with how people get to be

taken advantage of. But what had he been doing? It seems clear to her that Robbie had being taken advantage of, had been indoctrinated.

In her thinking, she wondered what Robbie had done? He *had* graduated high school. An accomplishment for sure, but she recalled seeing his last grades before school ended, and she would acknowledge to herself but not admit out loud to anyone else that Robbie was not a good student. Barely passing grades. No major failures, but then, no major accomplishments. She couldn't find any particular subject or class that his grades stood out. No visible talent lurking under the tedium of waiting out all those classrooms.

We're in such loss. Robbie gone. Paul mostly immobilized. Dad with frightfully few employment prospects, still under the multiple blows of losing his wife, his job, his son's mobility, now the death of Robbie. *That's a lot to handle*, she realized. *Is it too much?* came to her mind for a moment, but in her own context, there were ways to cope to focus on her own tasks, her own career, the projects of her responsibility, her field of expertise. Being employed in a field of specialization was her advantage. Her own pain drew her closer in to herself.

Her mind wandered back to the last time she had been home. Robbie had snorted about some line from her fluid mechanics book, spouted off, and ran out. What a horrid thing to remember as the last interaction with your brother, she sighed. Your younger brother, so much younger, and then gone. She remembered hoping some day to go to a wedding. Before high school Robbie had a happy friendships with young friends in their area, including some local girls, and she smiled at the memory of expecting some romance to blossom into eventual marriage. But high school had pummelled Robbie, both turning him more towards the pursuits of his male peers, and in perceiving the discomfort of day to day life. By that time it was cars, hunting, alcohol, and sports that occupied and preoccupied him.

The quiet whirl of the motor brought her back from the trees beyond. Paul position his chair parallel to hers, so they both faced the window. She wondered if she should speak first or wait. Most of the time, by the time she was ready to say "Paul...", he was already gone. So she waited and said nothing.

"He was too young," Paul said, almost in a whisper.

"Young and fragile," she replied.

"Young and fragile, and he had swallowed someone else's anger."

44

Nowadays, a woman driving a backhoe is not surprising. But sometimes it still raises an eyebrow, even if she is wearing a hardhat. But nothing would deter Janice Husk from her job. Her father, Craig Husk, had all sorts of large equipment, and she was determined and decided she was going to learn them all.

The county sheriff's office had contracted with Husk & Co. to excavate the area behind some buildings off River Road. Janice was on the backhoe, and Craig Husk came in his pickup, and two men drove dump trucks.

Kenner met them at the site. Four deputies were with him. Yellow plastic caution tape marked the perimeter of the lot.

"This is the place we need to dig up," Kenner told them all. "We have a search warrant to excavate anywhere in this lot."

"Let me arrange the crew how best to handle this. It will be easiest if we start on the north side of the lot and work south," Craig Husk said.

"Our men will inspect the digging. We'll need to visually inspect every load, and if we find anything of interest, we will need to stop to process any evidence," Kenner said.

They all donned latex gloves. Soon they all were gathered aside the backhoe as Janice Husk positioned it, and then directed its shovel to tear into the ground. All eyes were on the first load pulled from the earth. She halted as the men all poked and prodded the dirt in the shovel.

After a few moments, the all clear signal was given. The scoop of earth had yielded only earth. She dumped its contents into the first dump truck. One of Kenner's deputies has positioned himself adjacent to the cab of the dump truck to inspect the load as it was placed into the truck bed. After the load was dumped into the truck, all operations ceased as this deputy dug through the dirt with his long-armed spade. "Clear!" he announced, and everything started up again, and Janice returned to the digging.

Kenner and the deputies followed Janice's backhoe, watching every shovelful. After about two hours, "Halt", yelled a deputy, and Janice cut the motor. "Here," he pointed. What looked like a patch of cloth could be seen. A deputy jumped in the ditch and using a small shovel started to clear away dirt from all sides of the object. Soon, the form of the shape became clearer. It was a large military-type top-loading duffel bag that had been tied closed. It was discolored and stained.

Kenner spread out a clean tarp on the side of the ditch. Three men were needed to drag the duffel from the ditch onto the tarp. A deputy used a phone to film the activities. Kenner brushed dirt from the opening of the duffel. It had been tied closed. Kenner and a deputy pulled and strained and opened the duffel. Spreading the opening, Kenner peered inside. "Call the coroner," he said, "and collect soil samples where the duffel was." It was their first find of the day.

With the coroner called, they knew that it was now time to wait. Janice jumped down from the backhoe. Those from Husk & Co. had all met the deputies before, not the first time they were tearing up a lot searching for evidence. But if it was a body, and it sounded like it was a body, it was a first for most of them. The employees knew that there was a limit to what small talk they could elicit from the deputies, so all conversation was kept professional.

"Coroner says about an hour away, so you'll can take a break," Kenner announced.

The group from Husk & Co. jumped into the pickup and headed down the road to the Timely Diner.

"Hi Sue," they said as they sat down. Coffee was poured without even asking.

"Working today," Sue remarked.

"Digging, that's us," said Craig Husk matter of factly. It was something he was used to saying, he had said it hundreds of times.

They waited until the waitress left with their orders to speak. They knew enough to keep things quiet while such kind of an investigation is starting.

Craig Husk spoke first. "Not the first time digging work came across a body."

They waited. He continued, "Now, this probably the first time for you all. What happens is the coroner will take at least an hour or two, so we're in no rush here."

Their food arrived, and they ate in silence.

Husk spoke again. "No denying there's some bad people in the world. Our job is to dig. Usually much more plain. A home, foundations for a commercial building, sewer lines or bridge abutments. Those are usually clean cut. But you can run across something unexpected in them too."

"Body of who?" Janice asked.

"No telling yet," Craig said. "That duffel was pretty big, and it took three men to haul it out of the cut. I should tell you all that they all will be pretty tight lipped. Don't press them for gossip or it will put us in a bad light."

They nodded.

45

Soon they were back at the site. The coroner and the deputies were huddled with Kenner over the duffel. The coroner had set up a makeshift table, and had spread out tools and instruments.

The Husk group waited. Finally Kenner spoke to them. "Coroner's taking the duffel back to the lab. Once its loaded in his van, we can resume digging."

The took their places. Janice jumped in the backhoe, and the men by their trucks.

Some deputies wrestled the duffel into a larger container, and hauled it into the coroner's van. They folded back his table and that went into the van next. In a moment, it was gone. Janice started the backhoe and waited.

"Let's get started," a deputy motioned, and they were back at work.

46

It took three days to excavate the entire site. No other remains were uncovered, but many beer cans, some drug paraphernalia, and a few weapons were found. All were bagged for the forensics group. Kenner disbanded the operation and went back to the office.

"Why are they taking the beer cans? Would these cans be evidence?" Janice asked her father quietly.

"Fingerprints, I'd guess," he replied.

47

Deputy Mill was at his desk. "Coroner called," he said to Kenner.

"I'm going to go see him. Want to go with me?"

"Sure."

48

"Gruesome," said the coroner.

"Not a word I'd expect to hear from a coroner," said Kenner.

"In this line of work, you get to accept all of humanity's failings. But once in a while, things are worse than usual."

Mill wanted to just ask *Whaddaya got?* but held his tongue. He knew better to rub the coroner the wrong way by trying to rush him. But said coroner was one who took his time and kept his cards close to his chest. So Mill said, ever so politely, "Why do you say gruesome?"

"In the duffel was a hacked up body of a deer."

"A deer?" Kenner said, amazed. He expected worse...

"But it gets worse," said the coroner.

Both Kenner and Mill looked at each other and waited.

"Mixed in with the hacked deer is a hacked human body."

"Good Lord!" Mill exclaimed.

"Yes indeed," coroner replied.

"Anyone who did a quick look would have tested and found deer meat, and let it go at that. But I was curious, and keep looking. And I found enough inconsistencies... and that's what we have, gentlemen."

"Any idea who it is, or who might have done it?"

"Still working on it. It's all going to be very slow. At this point we need to test everything. DNA, dental records, all blood and fluids, including toxicology, and so on. Will take more time. We may find other things...."

49

"Coroner called," Mill said.

"Let's go," Kenner replied.

The drive took twenty minutes. They didn't speak during the drive.

The coroner, Harold Graymond, did not look up when they arrived.

"The human body with deer meat was a young woman, between 18 to 25 years old. And pregnant."

Kenner and Mill waited. They knew well enough to not pummel him with questions.

"I was able to determine that from blood and fluids. You had better check missing persons. Based on the state of what was recovered, it will be difficult to ascertain height. Some parts of the body were not with most of the remains."

"Like?"

"Like the head."

"Dear Lord," said Mill. "Hacked up. Dismembered."

"And no chance for dental records from what we have," said Mill, but he knew that would not necessarily be helpful. The region had a history of poor dental hygiene, and many residents went years without seeing a dentist, or skipped it altogether. Maybe investigators would get a lucky break, but it didn't seem a high possibility. And they would need the head.

50

"I do have some DNA for you." The coroner was matter of fact. As usual.

Mill knew it was a long shot. Most local residents would not have had an opportunity to come into contact with any place their DNA would have previously been collected. But it was worth a shot.

"I'll send it to the state capital, and see what happens."

51

"Forensics from the State Capital called."

Mill looked up.

"One of the weapons unearthed at the dig site matches the slug that killed Robbie Westfall and was used in Billie Johnson's armed robbery."

"Without the elusive Mr. Johnson, we don't have a history of where that weapon came from or where it went."

"Surprising he hasn't turned up."

"Yes. But he will, they usually all get caught."

"Eventually."

52

"Mill here."

"Mill, it's Graymon, coroner."

"Harold. How are you? What's up?"

"We have some information on the victim in the deer duffel. Without the head."

"Yes?"

"Female. About 22-24 years old. About two months pregnant. We did get DNA, sent to the State capital. You'll get a report if they match anything. No head yet, so no dental records."

"Got it. Thanks for the work on this."

"It was a tough one. I'll call if anything new is found."

"Thanks."

53

"Kenner, state headquarters on the line for you."

"Kenner here. I see. Matched? Close, I see. And another match? That's very helpful. We'll get a warrant. Thanks, bye."

"Mill, there was a family match on the woman in the deer duffel. Seems her brother is a guest at the state prison. So we can say the victim's name is Hankins, first name Brenda."

"Brenda Hankins. As I recall, she worked at Dan Owen's church, in the gift shop."

"Yes. And there's more. There was a DNA match on the fetus. Fortuna's heavy, our friend Wayne."

"So Wayne was the father."

"Yes. That match was simpler, his DNA on file from his incarceration."

"That's a motive right there. Girlfriend pregnant. If he didn't want her or the child."

"Let's see if we can dig up any more connection. Just because the child was his doesn't make him a killer. It is possible motivation. And yet, I would think he is the type."

54

With the search warrant in hand, Kenner and Mill opened Brenda Hankins' trailer. By the looks of things, no one had been inside for months.

They found some clothes, some costume jewelry, a few magazines, some letters.

"No pictures," said Mill.

"Hmm. Either they were taken or she wasn't the type."

"Looks like they were taken," Mill said, pointing to a patch of wall with the shape of a frame.

"Lets bag it all up," said Kenner.

As they were gathering all of Brenda Hankin's, Kenner grabbed a pile of magazines, and a small diary slid out to the floor. He picked it up and opened it, and read a few pages. "Looks like we have found some of what we are looking for."

55

"Mill here. I see.... Oh really?... That certainly adds more to this case. Thank you Graymond."

He turned to Kenner.

"That was the coroner. That duffel keeps on yielding its secrets."

"Oh?"

"Seems he also isolated some blood from a second person. Some bloodstains. And there's match."

"Let me guess. The father of the fetus."

"That's right. Maybe our Wayne injured himself when cutting her up or she fought back."

"One or both are likely. But any defense attorney will say that it it was Wayne's duffel, he had previously injured himself hunting, and that was later stolen, prior to the homicide."

"I think it is time we find our elusive Wayne and started questioning him."

56

"Overdosed yesterday. Released this morning."

"Thanks, nurse."

Kenner and Mill walked back to their car. "I guess it would not surprise me. Overdose. We'll find him soon enough."

57

"Pastor, you called us?"

"Yes," said Dan Owens. "Please, be seated."

After a moment, he continued, "As you know, the clergy-penitent privilege, and the laws governing it, and I do not wish to break it."

Kenner and Mill waited. They both knew that it was best to say nothing at this point, and wait for Pastor Dan to continue.

"In the course of my work, I hear many things." He was visibly upset, and needed time to compose himself.

"Well," he went on, "a certain piece of information came to me that seems to indicate that a crime may have been committed. Of this crime I am unable to speak to you about for I have no information about it. But."

"But," he went on, "there is something I can relay to you. I came to hear that a person's remains might be found at a certain place."

He then told them the location of a parcel of land a few miles out of town.

"Thank you. I can appreciate that some times you may hear discomfoting information," Mill replied.

"Yes. Sometimes I wish it were not so, but it is." He waited a moment. "I should add that this information came to me from a person who stumbled upon the remains, in pursuit of some other aim."

"I see," said Kenner. "If I can guess, someone was about to do something nefarious but not related to the deceased inadvertently came across the remains."

"You have understood."

"We appreciate your helpfulness. We will investigate."

58

The next day, after obtaining a search warrant, Kenner, Mill, and two deputies arrived at the locale Owens had indicated. They did not know, nor had Owens, what the state of the purported remains were in. So they knew they were looking for some remains, but beyond that, they had nothing to go on.

"The best way to do this," Kenner spoke, "Is to break up into two teams, and measure out this lot in a grid pattern." He had arrived prepared, with small stakes of wood, ribbon tape, shovels, gloves, and so on.

They spent the better part of the first hour, staking down the ribbon tape in 100-foot squares. They they began their search. When someone saw a promising point, they started to dig.

Some time after the third hour, one deputy called out, "I got something here!"

They all rushed over. Buried in a small depression they could see what appeared to be human hair and the back of a human head."

"Call the coroner. And we'll start with heavier equipment next time."

59

The following week, the coroner's report was available.

Mill read the report. "The head belongs to the torso that was found in the deer duffel. Brenda Hankins. And cause of death was gunshot to the head."

"Well, at least there we now know the cause of death."

"We can call in the heavy equipment now, and dig up the place.

60

A few days later Janice Husk, with her father Craig Husk, and crew were assembled.

"Ready when you are," the elder Husk called to Kenner.

"Same routine. We need to inspect each load before it goes into the dump truck."

So they began.

61

It took two days this time, digging and sifting through the entire lot. Several items were collected by the deputies and bagged. Most were out of direct sight of Janice, so she was unable to see what was being saved. At one point she heard some deputies talking about some weapons, so she assumed some guns were unearthed.

62

Charles Butte liked his job. A steady income, no likelihood of being laid off, a uniform, the opportunity to embody state-sanctioned power. All for the better, he thought. Not that he relished a physical fight because he did not. He would fight if provoked, but never wanted to initiate an altercation. He liked to be considered that he could bring the image of power to a potential confrontation, rather than actually instigate its use.

He wasn't above identifying himself with his uniform when the conditions seemed to be in his favor. He would often wear his uniform to social events, finding it brought out differing reactions from those he encountered. So wearing the uniform outside of his work environment became a habit. He liked to assume that, if in uniform, he might get preferential treatment from local law enforcement should he be found inebriated or in some altercation.

But it was the "social" aspect of social events that was the primary driver of his behavior. Periodically he would encounter a woman who found the uniform enticing, and so he indulged. Those trysts lasted but a few days or weeks, which was enough for him. Nice while it lasted, but never meant to last. Over time he had had a number of connections of that kind, and no longer remembered most of their names.

When he thought about those experiences, he realized it was with pleasure such encounters began, but it was with relief they ended. He saw the act of *getting* close a highly pleasurable event, but the act of *being* close almost intolerable. Sometimes he wondered why, but after a while it didn't seem to matter. He had found what worked for him, and he stuck with it. Until it didn't.

63

Freddie Millerson acted as if he had found the body by River Road. Actually, his dog had found it. But Freddie knew he could act as if he had been the one who stumbled upon it. Not that he minded whatever notoriety he could derive from it. He had gone directly to his local watering hole, The Standing Bar. No one ever knew how this particular bar got this particular name, but it didn't matter. Rarely did anyone ask, but if someone ever did ask the bartender, the answer was always "I'm sure there was a reason" was all they heard.

The bartender, a man named Mack, was a repository for all sorts of news, legends, myths, and opinions. Most of it all one could ignore, but should some local person come up in conversation, then it was something to keep one's ears open about.

Freddie was a regular patron, but this time his entrance was different enough for Mack to glance his way and say, "What's up Freddie?" It was his way of asking two things at once: Something is different so what news do you bring, and do you want your regular beer on tap?

Freddie sat at the bar, and his dog curled up at his feet. It was used to being in the bar.

Freddie appeared a combination of frozen and trembling. "Found a body off River Road," was all Freddie could say. With that Mack poured two beers. He slid one over to Freddie. He picked up the other and drank from it.

Just then, some police vehicles drove past.

"I see," said Mack. "Any idea who?"

"Didn't get a chance to see the face. Shot. Younger guy."

"Bad news," said Mack, realizing that this event instantly will become the uppermost topic for the next week. There were enough regulars that came and went at all sorts of times of day that he could talk about this event multiple times.

Freddie had drained his glass. Without a word, Mack refilled it.

Silently Mack started to mentally categorize all the young men in the area that he could think of, and assess which ones would more or less likely to get themselves in a position to be a victim of a gun. Eventually when the victim became known, and some circumstances revealed, Mack would be the one to say "Of course it was X because...." adding mildly relevant or irrelevant tidbits from his store of local commentary.

Mack turned on the large television and waited for some news to appear. Nothing news-worthy was on, so he turned the volume low.

"Hey, Merle," said Mack, as Merle Jacks walked in.

"Time for a quick one," Merle replied.

"Freddie here found a body off River Road," Mack said, and poured a drink for Merle.

"River Road?" said Merle, and drank from his glass.

"River Road," said Mack, and drank from his glass.

"River Road," said Freddie, and drank from his glass.

The dog said nothing. The dog did not drink.

"Hello, John."

"Eve."

"It's been a while. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Yourself?"

"Not bad."

A moment of silence.

"It's good to see you well."

"Thanks Eve. Yourself as well."

Rarely reticent, but in the situation Deputy John Mill was at a loss for most words. He and Eve Anders had a brief intimate encounter just as his divorce became final. Brief it certainly was. After two days, both immediately knew it was not comfortable to continue. It was one of those things where compatibility was so lacking and its absence so obviously glaring, that they both agreed to end it at once.

"Let's not be distant," she said. "We tried, it did not work out, we're still the same people. John you are a good man."

"Thanks Eve. I still think highly of you. You too are a good person. I'm sure we will continue to run into each other. It's a small town. Thanks for being so clear and direct. "

Clear and direct. The words rang in her head for hours after conversation. She only could smile to herself. She knew her reputation: she was seen as quiet and reserved, so she tried to put that to good use. It was assumed that discretion was something she highly valued, which meant that men who approached her would feel safer than, say, someone who had a reputation as a gossip.

But her real secret was that she valued her privacy above all else, and that she preferred very short relationships. Not even a relationship actually, more like a temporary connection. A few days, or as in the case of John Mill, two days. That satisfied her. It was enough. The brevity caused it to be emotionally undemanding, which was her desire. Undemanding from others, undemanding of her. In those short moments, she felt she had experienced some passionate intimacy, a heartfelt opening, and was done. Enough. No need to drag it on.

From her perspective, the sense of a man's potential discretion was as important to her if not more so than any other trait. Some women might look to finances, others to reliability, or gregariousness, looks, or some other quality in assessing a potential mate or even a temporary connection. But for Eve, above all it was someone who would be discreet.

65

No matter what, keep a low profile. Been really lucky. So far. Living in the open air is better than a cinder block cage.

And no, I, Billy Johnson, don't mind sleeping wherever I find myself. Always was a loner, and when I got to chummy with other rascals, I would end up in their disasters.

Don't mind being farm labor. Paid cash, get fed, no questions asked, no answers needed. I would guess there's some other reasons they are willing to have me stay here, maybe they have secrets of their own. But I don't ask questions, don't pry into anything, keep my eyes straight ahead, to the ground.

Big enough operation here not to need to travel every season to some other outfit. Food, shelter, that's all a man needs. Plenty to do, no chance to get stir crazy. Keep weeding, keep planting, keep digging when necessary, tend to the animals, pick fruit from trees. Would be nice to stay here as long as I can.

I have the sky here, the ground. I am free from the cement walls, the bars, the constant burden of men and power. Here I am free.

Guess I was lucky. Not many ever get out. Few stay out. But no time now to think about luck. Just work, eat, sleep. Tend to the ground. That will keep me enough. I think then I lose. Thinking will get me in trouble, and sent back. Got to keep my mind as quiet as my tongue.

66

Time off. Mary Westfall never considered a vacation. Just as well, she thought. Coming home was where she put her mind whenever the thought of what to do with her "vacation time." No Carribean beaches lured her, no snow caps peaks of the Alps or Andes were of any interest. It was home, home to Appalachian hills, to the trees and hills and fields of her youth.

Being back, settling in to her old room, untouched since her last visit, she felt calmed, but not at peace. The loss of Robbie hovered, and allowed the inner gloom and emotional despair into the home to reflect the unemployment and economic emptiness of entire area. The lack of opportunities for employment, the general discouragement of most everyone she met and knew, all reflected back to her that she was alone. Employed elsewhere, a graduate degree in her hand, salaried to a large corporation... all foreign to the vast majority of those around her. She took no pride in comparing herself to others. She kept to herself.

On occasion, she would encounter a former classmate. In this area it was only a high school classmate she could possibly run into. Mostly all of them were on their third pregnancies, or had two or three

children under foot, living in trailers or with parents, mostly unemployed or underemployed, receiving monthly government support. Mary knew well enough not to speak of her job, her career, and even when asked remained vague and spoke of other topics. With the loss of Robbie, Mary discovered she had a topic which would deter any questions into her own life.

Months went by, and the mourning in her heart began to diminish. Robbie stood like a presence outside of her sight, over the next hill, in the dusk and the mist. But her pain subsided as she realized Robbie was not far from her. He was as close as she needed him to.

So she was able to venture out, slowly, quietly. She sat in the back of a quilting class at the community center one Monday evening. The women sat at the table, spreading out their cloth and quilts. They saw her, acknowledged her, but allowed her to sit afar without needing to press her to join them. They knew, and she knew, that she was not ready for the social words needed to join them.

She was grateful they left her alone, but she also knew she needed to hear words from others' mouths, words of speech and activity, words of human interactions. She and they knew she needed to not speak to anyone that night, but to be present in the room with them. It was the small step, the first step, the first way of finding herself back. Back from the grief of losing her brother, but also back from the isolation of so many years in her pursuit of her degree, her job, her career.

Her mother had died early in the year before high school. That had sent her inward, and leaving her to herself. Upon entering the school, the frivolities of high school lost their appeal, and it was in to physics and math she found herself. So much so, that college was a simple step, whereas most of her classmates drifted from high school, either physically or emotionally, even before their high school years were completed.

Her grades and her scores, uncommon for a young woman in the area, were a natural ingress to an engineering school. College, and being away, afforded her a refuge. A place she could focus on studies, on her text books, on the formulas she craved. The presence of formulas to illuminate the physical world greeted her amiably, and it was there she excelled. In the first college summer she interned at a large petrochemical company, then she was invited back the second summer, then again; she graduated and later earned a graduate degree; all paved a career path with the fervor she had longed for when the internships transitioned into employment.

The return after Robbie's death brought her back. Mary knew well enough that she could stay for a while, but after a period of time, she would need to move back into her own world. She could stay with her father and brother, but she did not have a life there any longer. Her life in engineering was waiting for her to return.

The door bell. Glancing at his phone, he saw it was 8:02 p.m. Derk Sims opened the door.

Several men, one holding a paper up to show him. Derk wasn't sure he recognized any of them.

"Your turn," said the first man.

Derk glanced at the paper. The title on the first page said "Authorization to Search." He knew what that meant.

As part of his job, periodic or occasional searches of the home of personnel were something to get used to. He had signed that agreement during his application process. They could search his home at any time if they obtained agency authorization. He felt relieved it was not a regular court-ordered search warrant, which would signal a much worse situation. He wanted to ask then what they were really looking for, but asking questions did not seem appropriate. And anyway, they undoubtedly wouldn't tell him anything. Derk assumed that instead of waiting until someone did something untoward, they instituted random rotating searches of various employees. Seemingly serving as a deterrent, as no one knew when they would be next, but since they knew it could happen at any time, most likely anyone wanting to hide something would take severe precautions. At least one would think.

Derk waited as they roamed through his house. One of the men waited with him. "Just to keep an eye on you," the man said. Derk simply smiled back but didn't say anything. He didn't feel he had what to be frightened of. He knew he did not take classified papers home. No disks, USB sticks, CDs or other media. So he waited.

He heard them boot up his computer, shuffle through his desk, open books. He expected them to ask him to log in to his computer, but they didn't. Later he realized they did not need to, they had their own ways of access.

It took some time. "I'm getting a bite," Derk said and went into the kitchen. His minder followed. Derk pulled out some snacks, a bottle of beer, and offered the man one. "No thanks," he replied dryly.

Back in the living room, Derk turned on the television, ate the snacks and open his beer. Kill time with noise and empty drama shows.

What seemed several hours dragged by. Finally the leader, followed by the rest, spoke to Derk. "We'll report back to the office. They will inform you if there's anything to know." And with that they all left.

Derk sat nursing the last of his beer. At least he wasn't taken away in handcuffs. He tried to relax, now that it was over. Damn, he said to himself, your heart's in your throat when this happens. No way to get out of it. He assumed one or more of them were armed, maybe all of them, and had the training to subdue any recalcitrant if necessary. He could barely relax. He was sure he would not sleep well tonight. He pulled another beer from the kitchen. So, likely they will or will not find some thing to report. Probably minor if anything. At worst he may face some minor disciplinary action. Should he tell Johnny tomorrow? He trusted Johnny, they were workmates. But you never know... He didn't want to

call in sick in the morning. He felt that would give a bad signal to whoever was watching him. On the other hand, he would be dragging all day, and feeling miserable.

But he felt his job was still his.

At least for now.

68

"You'll never get laid off because of lack of work," he recalled being told by a relative when he had applied for the job. And that was true. There was never a time that there was nothing to do.

Paperwork or field work. He was expected to do some patrolling every day, despite the never ending paper pile on his desk. The incoming stream of arrest records, warrants, out of state messages, phone calls and follow ups, investigations, prisoner transports, and so on... Plus to keep in mind older and unsolved cases. And of course, everything gets interrupted when an emergency is declared. Twenty four hours a day was never enough, and there was never a time anyone on the force felt that they were adequately staffed to handle everything. So Deputy John Mill plugged way at what was in front of him.

When first on the job, he was tempted to think he could finish in a day the amount of work that came in on that one day. He quickly realized that he would never be able to go home at night if he expected himself to complete what had come in for the day. He hated to leave the office with the feeling of "...well, tomorrow is another day." That concept seemed to denigrate the suffering of the victims of crimes and accidents. So he quickly turned away from that sentiment. More recently he turned to the idea of attempting a balance, that his guiding energy should be one of equilibrium. His actions, he told himself, were to try to keep things even, or return things to an evenness, or to help prevent the overloading of things in a negative direction. Whenever he apprehended someone, or attempted to assist a victim of a crime or an accident, he did his best to keep bring things to a balance.

The actions of someone who has committed a crime by definition has done something that throws off community balance in his society, he thought. Someone who is injured has become a victim of some kind of imbalance, certainly a physical one. So, he reasoned, his job was to work to bring things back into some sort of stability. Or in the possible direction of stability, anyway. Criminals need to be apprehended, victims of crime need assistance, accident victims need medical care. Many times he felt that just his presence on his rounds, his visibility and accessibility, were positive steps in maintaining some sort of community leveling.

That was on most of his better days. But there were other times that his feelings went elsewhere. He sometimes wondered, *Why did so many turn to crime?* and *Why were drugs and addiction such a compelling experience despite their leading so many to despair and ruin?*

Whenever he started on a train of thought that brought him to question: *Won't it ever end?*, then he knew that he had let things go too far. It was then he knew he needed time away. Take a walk, take a break, go fishing, take a short road trip, a hike in the woods, a swim. Away.

69

Most times he was able to reflect on what he witnessed without the downward spiral feelings of the enormity of it all. From his post, he saw how lives were ruined and lives were saved, how people destroyed themselves or others, or were rescued or rescued others. Maybe it balanced out, he knew it would be too distressing if there was some balance or formula he would have to consider: lives lost vs. lives saved, or some sort of equilibrium where destruction countered the positives. No, that was another idea to avoid. No, it could never be balanced. The swing of events should never even be measured against other events, otherwise one might find an overwhelming imbalance, and the calculations would fail, as a pendulum that fell from its fulcrum. And the likely enormity of that imbalance, the seeming irreversibility of the unevenness of circumstances, will eventually cloud one's mental outlook, and pull it forever downward.

And so, without consideration, he developed an emotional distance from the events that he encountered. It would serve no one, he understood, if emotions overwhelmed him. Sad and distressing tragedies occur almost daily, and he would quickly have no ability to perform his duties if his emotions took control. Early he remembered a high school assignment, a story, where a young man, one Nick Adams, is told by his doctor father to ignore the screams of a woman in labor so that he could focus on what was important.

But that distance he maintained within himself to keep his own balance brought its own destabilization. His marriage ended after three years. Emotions that could be be not expressed in his work boiled over at home. Or they proved too hidden at home as well. Maintaining a distance could not be depended on, context defined everything. Catherine at first accepted his allegiance to his post, with its attendant disruptions. Later it came to be the irritant that toppled their relationship. Afterwards he wondered if his work, with all of his attention to the emergencies and calamities of others were more than she ever could have competed against. She was always Catherine, never allowing herself to be called Cathy. So he realized she was probably the only Catherine within hundreds of miles, all others had long desired to be known by a more simplified Cathy. After their divorce, she moved East. Last he heard she worked for an insurance company.

Aside from the brief moment with Eve, there were few personal connections since. It was clear why law enforcement families tended to pair and marry within their own community. Now being single, he had put a barrier between his personal needs and his work obligations. He knew he was dedicated to his

work. He felt confident he could couple again with someone who knew and understood what his kind of job meant. Someone who likely grew up in that kind of family.

70

He often stopped at most local business establishments. It served to show his presence, renew connections, sometimes to gather information in investigations. He sometimes was the recipient of unexpected information. He reminded himself that it also was to be social, as he felt it was in his best interest to not be seen as only an officer of the law. He knew he needed to keep himself in circulation. Without saying much most locals knew he was single.

While he patronized local eateries, he made it a habit not to be seen at any one too frequently. While sociability was usually a good thing, he knew too much in the course of his business could be detrimental.

On that day, he stopped by the Timely Diner, and found himself talking to the waitress. They were on a first name basis.

"How are you, Sue?"

"Not bad, John. Been a week or more since you've been here, yes? Busy day?"

"Every day is a busy day in my business."

She sensed a tiredness in his reply. "Well then, knock off early and go home and rest."

"Now that's a thought. Maybe I will." He could use some down time, he told himself. "Think I will grab the fishing pole and head down to the river."

"I hear fishin's good these days by Rock Park."

"That a fact? Well, that's helpful news, Sue. I reckon I will be there in about three hours. Got to wind up a few odds and ends first. Now, what's today's special?"

After he ate, he was back at the station, and without much effort, clocked out and went home, changed, and gathered up his fishing gear. Shortly thereafter he was casting his line into the river.

It was sometime later, before it got dark, that a familiar figure carrying a basket of snacks sat down next to him.

"Thought you'd like some dessert and some company," she said.

"Well, that's mighty nice of you. Must say I was surprised to see you. But happy you found me."

"I did know where you'd be."

"Indeed you did. In fact, it was you who told me where to fish."

"Looks like you caught a live one," she smiled at him.

"I'm glad you changed out of your uniform, Sue."

"I'm glad you changed out of yours, John."

They moved closer to each other.

71

Sometimes I just have to stare straight ahead. I guess myself lucky, I, Janice Husk, get to make things move with big noisy and nasty machines. No one dares to take me on when I am in control. We move things, we move large things, and there's precious little on god's green earth we cannot move, and precious little that can stop someone like me on that machine.

Glad my dad trained me as he did. No difference that I'm a woman. He never considered not to show me something or have me do something. I'm as good as any equipment operator now. With the strength my dad gave me, I know I can do it all.

Been happy to keep me busy and here. I see many women get out of school and either get pregnant and marry into basic servitude, or drift down. Some lose their way, some are destroyed by others, like Brenda. I don't want to end up that way. It doesn't need much book learning to run this equipment. It takes some balance and knowing how land reacts. Earth will move if you push it the right way.

There's something to do most of the time. Rains and weather in our area give what to do. And state and county work is different and varied, gets a different take on things. Meet some interesting fellas that way. Been wondering about some I seen at some of the digs we did for the state.

But I hear now Sue's got herself one of the deputies, the tall one. Maybe I should move along myself. Gotta keep my eyes open.

72

What is sometimes referred as "tribal knowledge" by social scientists is crucial for survival when living on a homestead in hill country. Knowing your neighbors, knowing who one could call for help when building a barn, which creeks overflow with extended rains, who can advise about animals, both livestock and predators, and so many other things that it takes a wide variety of people to sustain such a community. Marie Fry was known as a gregarious and outgoing woman, to be found participating at

many activities. Whether raising a barn or more social occasions found Marie with food and conversation.

Like some residents, Marie Fry lived in a home on a few acres. She had inherited the property, so she was in no danger of without a place. As she was the only relative of her aunt, who had inherited the the property itself from previous generations, she lived without fear of a bank. Only a few in the area were so fortunate. Many, whose incomes were intermittent, were perpetually in fear of being imminently in, or were actually in, arrears. Money was not always easy to come by.

While she owned the small property outright, like many places in the area, she did not own the mineral rights. Mineral rights and the easements that supported those rights were commonplace in the mountains. It rarely affected her, but she and everyone in a similar situation know that it could at any time. Perhaps the utility might want to drill a new well, a mining company might want to dig up some mineral or rock or gas, and so on. The possibilities of disruption were endless. So minding one's place for the efforts towards some sort of comfort and safety was a primary ambition.

For all it mattered, Marie lived alone with occasional visits from friends. Emily Sharper was one. They had known each other so long that they could finish each others' sentences.

Emily had no desire to farm. She lived alone as well, but supported herself as an English teacher at the local high school.

Many attempted to farm, or raise livestock on their land. Dairy farming was not suitable to the area as the hills were not conducive to large pasture animals. So some attempted to raise fenced-in smaller livestock, such as hogs, chickens, and the like. Marie provided a local market with the eggs produced at her small hatchery. More common for most was to allow timber harvesting on one's property. That however does not provide for a constant income for a small homestead, which could yield harvestable timber perhaps only once in a decade or more.

But the mineral rights her property did provide for a small additional source of some income, as use of the property for access by the local utility, to a wellhead for instance, for maintenance did incur some compensation.

If she was not extravagant, she could get by. So Marie, like most, scratched around for income.

And so did the men who were in a similar situation. Thus did mutual aid and friendships occur. And at times, coupling.

Westy quietly lent his hand to some local activities. He would show up with food, open some tables and arrange food with paper plates, cups, and so on. Some times he would speak, but often not. Then he would be gone. Others knew to leave him be. A silent nod was usually as much as they could expect. But for old-timers who knew him from his earlier days, when he was at the factory, there was a bond they knew and felt and would not break. It was the tragedy of Paul's accident they all knew was enough to let a man keep to himself in the back of his own world. And then after Robbie was killed, Westy was not seen for months, then rarely.

74

Ax in the woods. Quieter than a chain saw. A man would hear and feel every swing, every time the ax hit the timber. A man has so much energy and effort in a day, and swinging an ax rarely allows non-stop felling. A man must take break, must pause and gather his strength. Loss hits a man hard, and I am living through so many. My wife passing away..., then Paul's accident..., then Robbie being killed.... How much is there? How much else is there? And my working life, what a shambles. At least we have this land, these trees. At least I can go out in these woods, not see a soul, and fell a tree if I see it is time.

And they come back. You fell a tree, get it milled. Then over the years, others keep growing, and a new one grows. If you're not stupid, you never run out. An ax slows a man down, keeps him from destroying his land. A man with a chain saw does too much harm too quickly.

75

In this town, as in so many others, many residents know just about everyone, and some had histories going back years, and often generations. Marie Fry and Westy knew each other from before each of them married others. In high school, they dated. After high school, when Westy returned from the Navy, he found Marie had married. They were no longer close, and while initially acknowledging each other at local events, they kept their distance.

Over time, like most, people find their habits and routines, and keep to them. Marie Fry's husband Mike left her, and they divorced. Westy's wife died. Then Paul's accident.

Paul Westfall's accident became a burden for some. By blood, by marriage, by association..., residents took their associations to heart. Westy's former co-workers paid their respects and their allegiances. And Mark Sims, truck driver, and his family were clasped by their own relatives and friends. Marie

Fry, being a close friend of Mark Sims' wife, gave Mark and Donna a place to stay in the old trailer on her land for a year while they attempted to financially recover from the lawsuit.

With the town bifurcated on this issue, like so many others, factions arose and divided, over time melded and separated from others, and joined by even others, until there were a thousand and one camps on a thousand and one combinations of issues and events. So, in its aftermath, Marie Fry and Westy saw each other as more estranged than before.

A year after the lawsuit settlement, Derk Sims was able to move his parents across the state. They needed to emotionally and financially distance themselves from the difficulties that entangled them from and after the accident. Derk found them a stable and unassuming place closer to other relatives, and supported them. He continued to support them, and likely would do so indefinitely.

76

"Word is, you are in the clear," Johnny said.

Derk managed not to smile. He always thought of office politics in terms of baseball, where players labored to avoid showing emotion. "Good to know. Thanks," he replied quietly. He was glad and satisfied, but also felt tweaked by the rules. He knew that he would be cleared, that he never took work home or knowingly compromised security. So it was a necessary evil to have to live with raids and suspicion. Or at least temporary suspicion.

"Nature of the work," said Johnny, reading his thoughts. "Been through it a few times. Never fun, always a relief when nothing is found even if I knew I was in the clear from the beginning."

"Grief to those who slip up," said Derk.

"You're telling the truth there."

"And you earned some time off," Johnny continued.

"Oh?"

"Yes. The same word that cleared you, gave you a few weeks."

"I'll go visit my parents," Derk replied.

77

A few days later Derk walked into the Timely Diner. It had been years since he was back, and liked the way he felt.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please." Derk replied.

Coffee arrived. Derk glanced at the menu and made an order. Sue said: "You're from around here, I'd believe."

"Indeed, I am. Grew up here, but moved away."

"You look familiar like. What's your name?"

"Derk. Derk Sims."

"You being son of Mark Sims?"

"Yes. I'm on my way to visit my parents."

"Well, I'll be. I'm Sue, we went to the same high school, but I think you were a year or two ahead of me."

"Been a long time."

"Indeed."

"Janice!" Sue called out. Janice had just walked in.

"Hey, Sue," Janice replied.

"You remember Derk, was in our high school."

"Oh, yes Derk. I remember you," Janice smiled.

Derk felt oddly comfortable. "And I you. We were in a few classes together in our first year. Please sit down if you have the time," he said.

"Sure."

Sue took their orders.

"Your father was doing construction, as I recall," Derk said.

"We have a excavation company. I work there. Lots of local activity. I drive all sorts of machinery. Back hoe, excavator, tow trucks, and the like." That was enough, she thought. "And what are you doing these days, Derk?" Janice asked.

"I live in eastern Virginia, near D.C. I work in financial planning." The cover story.

"What kind of company?" Janice got curious.

"Government," Derk said.

"Oh! Sounds pretty stable. If I recall you didn't finish high school here."

"No. At the end of my first year of high school we moved, and I finished high school where we moved to."

"After that...?"

"I went to college. Studied foreign affairs and history."

"Well, let's eat. I'm hungry." She smiled at him. He felt it was a smile that gave him the same feeling as if she had placed her hand on his leg.

"Are you free after breakfast?" she asked. "We can catch up some more."

"Sure."

"I'm sure going to need to thank Sue for telling me you were here, Derk."

One thing lead to another, and two hours later, Janice and Derk were in Janice's bed. There was no work for her that day, and they both had the time.

The afternoon slipped by. Both dozed off and later again they made love again.

"What's your schedule?" she asked as night fell.

"I'm free until tomorrow morning. My parents asked me to stop by a friend of theirs hereabouts, and tomorrow night I drive to my parents. They've been through a lot and I need to spend time with them."

"And...?"

"I'll be with them for a week or so. After which I will drive back. I can come through here on my way back."

"I hope you do." She smiled. "Call me when you know when you can be back."

Later that night, after Janice drifted off to sleep, Derk reflected on his day. What a day. Eat breakfast, get a girl. Now how does that really work? He wasn't sure, but it sure did this time.

For a moment, he started to wonder if he made the right choice for work, as his choice for work decided where he lived and to a large extent who he associated with. Not that his friends or acquaintances were selected for him, but by the nature of where he lived, his income, his education, all things interrelate. Like attracts like most of the time, he thought. So in the world of his working life, including his days off, were proscribed by his work.

But when he was not in that environment, he realized, there were different possibilities, and he could be brought into contact with a different set of people. Like Janice.

He listened to her breathing. He had enjoyed her company, and it was obvious to him she enjoyed his. He knew that it might be that few who had any connections to this town had ever attended or even

graduated college. So he knew he was a standout. Even if he was not flamboyant about it. So much stereotyping about this part of the country annoyed him. He didn't like sports really, he would rather stick to himself than watch cars race in circles or drink himself silly.

There were times he had thought he would never come back to this town. He couldn't see trying to best others or to compete. He also disliked the inevitable comparisons that he would hear from others: he went to college, has a stable job, and so on. If he got along with someone, that was good enough, perhaps that person would turn into a friend, or even something more. If someone tried to out-manuever or take advantage of him, he just backed away.

Janice was a nice enough woman, he told himself. But her life now, he saw that there there was a limit to how they might get along. He would not quit his job and career to live here. He had spent too much time and effort to get educated and get the work he was doing, a job where he could keep his hands and clothes clean, to let it all go. And he knew better to think of her leaving her family and friends to join him. And she would never be comfortable in a larger urban locale. So, in reality, it was a nice weekend, and that was it. But they probably wouldn't need to talk about the reality until his way back.

78

It took somewhere around two hours to drive from Janice Husk to Marie Fry. But it was a world apart. Derk had always considered Marie to be of his parents' generation, as she was. Marie and his mother had been close friends, and his parents had stayed on Marie's small ranch for the first year after the accident and lawsuit. So he, and his parents, always felt they had a debt of gratitude for Marie's kindness when so many other seemed to fade away.

Marie, all so gracious at the time, did not charge them rent. That seemed to make all the difference then, what with finances being the intense focus of that time.

Over time, Derk had considered giving some money to Marie for her help to his parent at the time, but speaking with his parents over the years, they dissuaded him. While some money may have made Derk and his parents feel they had reciprocated in some way, since his parents had lost so much financially as a result of the lawsuit, money might become a wedge between them and Marie, they told him. They realized that money could and likely would complicate one of the few relationships they had been able to sustain since then.

But Derk was not totally convinced. He had gone shopping before leaving for this trip, so he had a large gift box for her. He thought he might ask Marie if she needed or wanted anything.

Ever since Derk learned of the accident which changed his father's life, he drove well, always cautious and wary of what could happen so unexpectedly. So while others may have made haste driving, Derk never did.

Arriving later at Marie's small farm, Derk was struck by how gracious and warm Marie was. He had always had a positive attitude towards her, not just because of how she helped his parents but also of her behavior towards them. And him.

"I am so glad to see you, Derk," she said.

"I am glad to see you as well."

He put a large box on the table by the door, obviously a gift. She knew better than to ask about it or open it immediately. It would wait. He'd probably say it was from his parents, which is why she was in no rush to deal with it now.

"Come here and sit next to me on the sofa," she said.

"Your place looks great," he said as he sat down. His memories of the times he had been there in the past were all centering on his parents' situation, the accident and lawsuit. Now, without them around, he could finally noticed the warmth and care she had put in making the place comfortable.

"Thank you, Derk. I'm glad you like it. I hope you will let me help you get comfortable." She had prepared coffee and tea and some snacks, and they were already on the small table in front of them.

He reached for coffee and a pastry, and they talked. She spoke of some incidents that had occurred to her in the recent year and they laughed. He smiled at her, relieved that it was possible to have a conversation with her that did not involve or revolve around his parents.

She put her hand on his shoulder. He noticed that she was wearing some jewelry and was dressed quite well. There was a faint smell of perfume. She leaned towards him and moved her hand from his shoulder and grasped his arm tenderly. He turned to her. She smiled at him and said, "Derk, come closer."

He moved closer, and then she put her hand on his leg and slowly maintained a massaging motion.

And so, in short order, there was some kissing and caressing, and as is usually the case, and without further ado, a quick movement to the bedroom, where she proceeded to undress him, and him her.

Derk, having just recently been with Janice Husk, needed more stimulation than he otherwise would have. But Marie, without knowing of Janice, assumed that Derk perhaps needed more attention because of the age difference between them. But they did not talk about their ages because they did not need to.

"That was wonderful, Derk."

He smiled back at her. "Happy, that's what I am."

They were lying on her bed.

He had his arm around her. Her hand was on his chest.

"You need to know that I have no designs on you. When you come to these here parts by yourself I'd love to see you. But when you go back to your home, or your parents or anywhere else, you are there. And rightfully so."

"Thanks for saying that," he said.

"You are a fine young man. In many ways. I am happy to see you whenever you're around. But the truth is we live in different worlds and have our different lives...", she said.

"Yes, I see it the same way," he said. Derk smiled back at her. *This is the conversation that I need to have with Janice.* Which I need to have with Janice next week on my way back. Inwardly he marveled at the juxtaposition of circumstances: how could it be that one situation provides the vocabulary and clarity needed for another?

"I am happy to see you," he said. "This has been great, and a warm surprise. And it makes me happy to know you better."

After a few moments, he went on.

"You have always been good to my family. I hope we can see each other again sometime, with and/or without them."

"They'll be no letting on if we all get together and see each other together later. Of course," she said.

"Of course." Derk smiled to himself. Here he is swearing to discretion and she has no idea about the secret and classified world he already lives in.

Marie stood on the front porch as Derk drove away and gave a wave. She saw him wave back and was down the small drive when another car approached. It was her friend Emily Sharper.

"And who was that young man, may I ask?" said Emily as she got out of the car.

"That was Donna and Mark Sims' son. He stopped by, he's on his way to visit his parents."

"How are his parents?" Emily asked. Without waiting for Marie to reply, she said, "He seems like a nice looking young man." If there was something between Emily and Derk, Marie was not about to let on.

"Em, emphasize the 'young' will you? Too young for me." She laughed at herself. Did Emily already suspect what had happened between herself and Derk? Marie was not about to reveal her recent tryst, at least not anytime soon.

"Let's go inside."

On the table was an large unopened gift box.

"Oh, so what's this?" Emily asked. "it's kinda big. And heavy."

"A gift from his parents. I'll open it later."

"That means I'll open it now," Emily immediately started to unwrap it.

"What is it?"

"Looks like a whole bunch of stuff. A high class kitchen knife, some gift certificates, a bottle of wine, some other smaller kitchen gadgets."

"That's nice..." Marie said, trailing off.

"Oh, I'd bet he said it was from his parents, but really he got it all himself."

"You may be right. They don't have much money. How well did you know them?" Marie asked.

"Oh, it was common knowledge back then, wasn't it? They stayed with you when they had to sell their place to pay the lawsuit. And that wasn't enough either."

"You were pretty scarce then, weren't you?"

"Well, I didn't want to be part of that sorrow. Donna's your friend and I wanted to give you gals time together."

"That's enough to make yourself scarce? Social time for them would have been a good thing."

"They were in just about mourning over everything, and my presence would have..."

"Would have... what? People who are in mourning need mourners around them to lessen the pain, dear. That's why people have funerals."

"There was another reason." Emily sensed it could be one of those moments where it was an opening to say something. "Well, I can tell you because you and I are friends. We sometimes share clothes, we cut

each others' hair, right? If you swear silence to the grave, and never bring it up again, I will tell you why."

Marie, startled at this statement, was silent. Finally she stammered, "Yes, of course."

"I had an affair with Mark Sims. It was before the accident."

Speechless, Marie's jaw dropped. "Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness, oh my ..."

Emily said, "So when it all happened, with the accident, lawsuit, their having to sell and move, and their staying here, it was too frightening to be around him and her together. The last thing he would need was me hanging around, the last thing I wanted to do was hang around, and I'm sure the last thing Donna needed as well."

"Did she know?"

"As far as I know, she didn't and still doesn't. And hopefully never will." Emily pierced the air with her eyes on this last point.

"Sure, sure," said Marie, agreeing that keeping it from Donna would be the best. "So now I understand why you weren't around much then. I missed you so much and wished that you could have been here... for me, too. But its all water under the bridge now. You're here."

"Yes, I so trust you to be quiet about this. But telling you also is me showing you I trust you."

"I trust you too," said Marie, but the connection with Derk was too fresh to expose it now. But Emily's confession opened Marie to go on.

Marie said, "Have you seen him since?"

"No. We spoke once just after the accident, and agreed it would be too tumultuous to see each other then. And that's how it's been since."

"That was a good choice. If they had split up then on top of everything, both of them would have gone into a tailspin each in their own way."

Marie waited a minute, then said, "There is something I would like to tell you myself."

Emily turned to Marie. Marie took her time to speak.

"It was a long time ago. When Westy first went into the Navy. It was only one time. That was before I met Mikey and we got married. That part you know."

"Only one time?" Emily said.

"With Mark. Before he met Donna."

"With Mark! Oh god oh god oh god!" Emily jumped from her chair. "We both did Mark Sims! Ha ha ha! We sure are sisters now, sisters of the heart! Ha ha ha!"

They laughed and hugged. Marie didn't have the capability to add *and I just did his son too!*

All of that talking certainly called for opening the bottle of wine, and so they did. And as would be expected under such circumstances, the conversation flowed as much as the wine did. Marie learned that Emily had been close to a number of men in the area, including a colleague who taught at her high school, a prison guard, a bartender, and others, although she did not name names. Emily learned that Marie spent every few weeks driving to the state capital to meet a "friend." What could be more satisfying as for two good female friends to confide in each other? They weren't rivals, were they?

82

Derk made sure he stopped at the largest supermarket he could find, and bought large quantities of food to bring to his parents. He hoped he could fill his car to overflowing with what he would purchased. Without needing to ask, he knew the best gift he could bring was to help stock their pantry.

Later, after he arrived at the small house his parents were renting, Derk reflected back on his recent few days. From the office, where he was cleared to continue in a job he could not talk about. Then hours of driving. To a quick connection with Janice. Almost too quick, he told himself. To then what he took to be a comfort to and from Marie. Then as a son at his parents.

At each stage, he needed to be reticent in one form or another. Secrecy was the name of the game at his work. With Johnny and his superiors, he was open about the work they did, but keeping things compartmentalized meant he had little chance to speak openly with most other co-workers.

The encounter with Janice was a new experience for him. He had never connected that way with someone so quickly. He needed to maintain his silence and evasion about his work with her as with everyone. And he also understood that expressing too much interest in her might lead to more complications than he was willing to be in. Looking ahead, he did not see himself settling down with her.

For him, Marie was different kind of a surprise. Even though he knew her for years, he would have never expected such an experience. And he felt at ease, knowing she would not expect a commitment from him. Or at least nothing other than an occasional visit.

When he arrived at his parents home and started to unload his car, both parents came out to assist him. The greeted him, and then all three silently carried the purchases into the house.

He knew what neither he or his parents could fully acknowledge. He was the main support for his parents. His tuition had been paid for by a combination of a scholarship, grants, and two loans. The larger one was a loan from his parents, years before the accident. So after graduating, upon getting hired, he set up the automatic deduction to pay off his loans, including to his parents.

He paid off the loan to his parents, and knew that although he may eventually pay off his remaining student loans, the money he sent to his parents would never end. Since they lost most of everything when his father was the driver in the accident, he knew he would never stop that payment. When he received an increase in his salary, he increased the amount that went to them.

His parents, when he was alone with each of them individually, expressed their quiet gratitude for his financial support. His mother simply said, "What you send us each month allows us to live." She was cooking in the kitchen and did not look at him while she spoke.

Later, he was with his father in the small barn. It housed a car, obviously under repair. Parts were lined up next to the engine compartment, and his father was assiduously adjusting a pulley. "Your help means a lot," his father said.

"Sure, dad." Derk knew enough not to speak more about it. He wanted them to know that helping support his parents meant the world to him. He long had told himself he'd rather forego numerous extravagances than see his parents in poverty.

Aside from those oblique references to the money he sent them monthly, there was no other conversation about it. Derk wondered if anyone else ever did the same. Both to give money, and to not speak about it. Something about it gave Derk a feeling of gravity, of belonging, of belonging to his family. While he was proud of his support of his parents, he felt he would likely never feel comfortable enough with anyone to tell them the entire story of how it came to be. Not yet, anyway. Maybe someone, someday. He would like to be able to tell someone about it and have them accept it without questioning him, without reading anything into it other than what it was. Sometimes he dreamt he was an ornate European-style fountain, with water gushing out in all directions.

Later at dinner, his mother said, "Your father and I would like you to visit Pastor Dan Owens on your way back. We have a letter for him."

83

The second connection with Janice went well. Or, as he admitted to himself, well enough. There was no big explosive scene, but it was obvious that they were settling in for the quiet finale of their recent connection.

They both admitted that although they had had spent enjoyable time together, the reality of their different lives meant that there would be little to maintain an ongoing relationship. Derk was relieved she had realized it so without his prompting, and he admitted to her he had felt similarly. This acceptance was surprisingly similar, despite the differences, to Marie's comments of gladness at his presence yet clear-eyed about the need for and reality of distance.

The last night Derk and Janice spent together was less robust than their initial nights, but as a result of the unhurried nature of this meeting, had they been asked they would probably have both agreed that there was more tenderness and serenity while in each other's embrace this time.

In the morning, one last stop before heading home. He needed to visit Pastor Dan Owens. He was looking forward to returning back to his apartment, his working life, his job, his routine, but the meeting with the pastor could not be put off.

84

The pastor was waiting for Derk at the church.

"Derk Sims!"

"Glad to see you, pastor," Derk replied. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, indeed. How are you?"

"No complaints. I'm returning east from visiting my parents and they asked me to give you a letter from them."

"Thank you, Derk." Dan put the letter on his desk. Derk wondered why he didn't open it immediately.

"Derk, what are you doing these days?"

Conversation first, Derk realized. "I work in Washington. I'm a financial analyst in the government."

"Well! Derk, a fine job. All your hard work getting into college paid off. I'm very happy for you. I'm sure your parents are very proud of you."

"Yes, I know they are happy for my situation," Derk replied. But inwardly he wondered. His parents' lives are so consumed by the the aftermath of the accident and lawsuit, that for them, time had stopped. They rarely had new things to say to him, rarely asked him about himself, his job, his life. He realized in their eyes it was as if he had moved from being their son to being a distant relative. "But, you know, they are still engulfed by the accident and lawsuit," he said to the pastor.

"Yes. The forgiveness needed to let go is still too dormant."

There was a silence. Derk didn't know what he could say, so he didn't.

"Give me a moment. I think I should read this now."

Derk waited. Dan opened the envelope and silently read. Derk could see it was one page, handwritten. From where he sat he could not make out the handwriting, so he was unsure which parent had actually written it.

"Yes, I would say that," Dan continued once the pastor put the letter back in its envelope. "Are they active in a church now?"

"They go to a few different places."

"That sounds like they have not yet found a place of comfort."

Derk nodded, He agreed, but didn't need to reply. It seemed obvious to him.

"And by forgiveness I don't particularly mean the Westfall family."

Derk winced hearing that name. Despite everything, it was the name rarely if ever mentioned in his family. Derk realized that Dan was talking about his parents forgiving themselves.

"Yes, they live in a darkness that they did not particularly bring upon themselves, but even now, after all is said and done, they perpetuate it upon themselves."

Pastor Dan paused for a moment, then continued.

"I wish I could tell you that is was a rare thing, but it isn't really. I have seen many times where tragedy seems to cause lives becoming stuck. Of course, a tragedy means it is time to stop and to mourn. After some time mourning, it becomes the time to heal. There is no expectation of ignoring the reality of whatever happened. And yet, even after time passes, there seems to be no "after" for many people." Dan paused again.

"What I'd hope for is that they find a place that can provide them the solace they seem to need so badly. In my world, we look for a church, a community. To find a comforting church, a place where they can make connections and friendships, and find places where they could be of help and benefit to others. To be of assistance to others who are less fortunate, that is where and when healing can occur. But I fear they are the ones who see themselves as least fortunate."

Derk nodded again. That seemed to describe his parents. Was he helping them, or just giving them the scaffold to stay in their own shadows? No, he decided, he wasn't going to go that way of questioning them and their situation. He was going to help them because they needed help and they were his parents and that's that. And if they were to find a way out of their current state, they would need to find it, probably on their own.

85

Deputy John Mill, on patrol that evening, received the call. Motor vehicle accident. Turning on his overhead lights, he quickly sped to the scene and arrived just after the ambulance.

No one plans to be in an accident, he thought. No one plans to die. But those that respond, the police, the ambulances, the hospital workers, the tow truck drivers, they are all the ones who prepare for accidents.

The ambulance medics extracted the driver from the wreck. A single vehicle accident. Maybe drugs, maybe alcohol, maybe fell asleep.

The accident had blocked the road, so Mill set his patrol car as a barricade to warn oncoming drivers.

Shortly one car, then two others, stopped and waited for the road to clear. Mill approached them on foot to tell them it wouldn't been too long to wait. As soon the ambulance left, and after a tow truck arrived, the wreck would get cleared.

At the second car, Mill stopped. "I recognize you," he said.

"Used to live around here some years ago."

"Your name is Sims?"

"Yes. And you are...?"

"Officer John Mill. You related to Mark Sims?"

"My father. We all moved away when I was in high school. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I recall him." That was enough to say. Mill had been a new deputy on patrol the night of the accident between Mark Sims and Paul Westfall, and the first to arrive at the scene.

The tow truck arrived, Mill recognized Janice Husk at the wheel. He acknowledged her with a nod as she passed him, and she nodded back. A full wave seemed out of place in this kind of situation.

Sitting in his car, Derk also recognized Janice on the tow. Small world, he thought. But Janice, with her focus primarily towards the accident did not see Derk.

That was fine with me, Derk said to himself. He and Janice had just made love a few hours earlier, and they had already parted. He wanted to think they had said their goodbyes, at least for the present. He wondered if she felt the same.

There was an upside to separating parts of one's life, he thought. He lived that way in his work, so why shouldn't it be so in other parts of his life?

86

"And how was it? How was he?" Sue asked.

"Really good. We both knew we couldn't expect this to go on. I like who I am here and his world is somewhere else. But it was sad because he was nice," Janice said.

"Always sad when something like that cannot continue."

"I'm jealous you have yours here," Janice said.

"The time you spent together was not wasted, Janice," Sue said.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "I know it too well, I understand it all, but still I am a little sad. Letting go is hard enough even if it is the right thing to do."

Sue smiled for her.

"He was kind and patient and gentle with me," Janice said. Tears came to her eyes. "He was the most kind, and um, giving, man I ever was with. So I really like him." She cleared her throat. "I mean, I liked him. Is that always going to be part of the unavailable types?"

"Oh, you can't think like that. He was a great moment in your life, so accept it as a nice and nurturing and pleasurable thing that happened to you. Think of it as something that made you better, stronger. If you make into something more than it was, like as something to use to be unhappy, you will only continue hurting."

"Yes," Janice said quietly, "It happened. And I need to let it go."

"Gone," said Sue.

"Gone."

87

Later that night, John tried to edge into the bed without waking Sue. But Sue moved closer to John and pulled the blanket over him. "Thanks," he whispered, and gave her a kiss.

She murmured a "Hmmm," moved closer to him, and exhaled, hoping to return to sleep. For all his abstract and interminable working hours, she was happy they had connected. She admitted to herself she didn't know all the reasons why she trusted him, but she knew she did.

John tried to turn off the day and sleep. Another night had brought another tragedy. Fatal single-vehicle accident. He had smelled alcohol when inspecting the vehicle. The ambulance personnel had offered medical aid until the driver expired, the coroner took the body, and the tow truck took the vehicle, John was left with the details that needed to be done. Often it lead to more phone calls when a police officer in another county would often do the direct next-of-kin visit, sometimes it fell to him when the victim was local. The fatality earlier that night was an out of state driver, so John spent the remainder of his

shift with phone calls and paperwork. Someone else would do the family notifications. Some more minutes of reviewing the events, and then he slept.

He dreamt that he and Sue were swimming in a lagoon. The sun was bright and warm and the two of them were alone. He was happy. He saw on her face that she was happy. He realized that he finally allowed himself to relax, and be happy with her. He slept.

88

It really doesn't matter how it happened, or even why. I can easily speak about genetics if I want, or poor behavior on my part growing up. Or a million other things. But it does not matter how or why. What only matter is now, what is now. How I am with myself and others. And how others are to me.

And sad to say, many people don't see me, Merle. They only see my body, my back, my curved back, and they back away, they recoil, and then they inhabit the distance. It's sad.

I didn't really know about it when I was growing up. And my school classmates accepted me, so I never saw myself as different. But later, when I saw pictures of me, I knew. And once out in the world, it was different. I was accepted by few people. I had some relationships. But the wider world, the opportunities that might come to others, that was all missing. I never was taken as an equal.

I was devastated. I was depressed. What was life worth under these circumstances? I had to come to terms with it. I had to find a way to be, to exist, to be able to be me even if many shunned me.

There came a time where I understood what I needed to do, what was best for me. I need to be in a work situation where I interact with the public. I had numerous jobs, and now I am work in reception at the motel.

For a while I was in warehousing, or field labor, but those situations did not bring me in constant contact with the public. Hidden working, I call it. It feeds my feelings of isolation, even if I am with some co-workers. It was not good for me.

So later I worked as at a roadside ice cream stand, taking orders and serving the ice cream. And a ticket taker at a country fair. A greeter and usher at a church. And other similar situations. And I became aware of feeling freer, a sense of openness. Even though some people might have some discomfort when seeing me, under the circumstances they had to interact with me, and I have then the chance to be human with them, give them what they are were wanting. Even in some way, to serve them. And so, perhaps, they could see me as human.

As a result, they came to some acceptance of me. Some acceptance, if only limited, was something. Better than nothing. And some people even were comfortable to become close. Some friendships. An

occasional relationship. Some acceptance by others was what I needed. And so, I was able to come to more acceptance of my self.

It was that pastor who told me about the meeting at the hospital group, for physical rehabilitation. Some patients after a surgery or other major event were in at least as much emotional pain as physical pain. And he said maybe I could be there, to help others. After some times, after thinking about it, I went.

I don't consider myself anything great or better. But I have come to more acceptance, which is something in short supply by people being treated there. I know how it is, how isolating it is to be physically different, to be an altered person.

It was surprising to learn that by being there for others, I found a more tranquil place within for myself. The patients there are in pain, in turmoil, in chaos, there is no end to their psychological and emotional disarray. And in no way can I calm them, or dispense positivity upon them. All I can do is be there and mention my own situation. Some can see me, others cannot, for I did not arrive there in the same tragedy as they did, and there are some that would only accept a parallel passenger in their grief.

89

One of the business establishments Deputy John Mill periodically made a courtesy stop at included the Standing Bar. He knew well enough his presence could be seen in many different ways. No law enforcement officer wants to be known as drinking on the job, especially in uniform, so his presence was usually momentary. He would say hi to Mack the bartender and head to the restroom. On his way out, he would stop by the bar, converse with Mack for a few moments, and take his leave. It gave him a chance look around the room to see who was in the bar, and occasionally learn a piece of scuttlebutt that was often worth knowing. As he was a well known figure in the area, most did not view him as a threat. While he might get asked a question by the curious, which he, as an officer of the law, usually could not answer, but even being asked told him much about what was on people's minds.

As patrons at the Standing Bar came and went frequently, there was a fairly constant rotation of comings and goings, so periodically there would be no one else in the bar aside from Mack. At those times Mill found himself able to stay and speak with Mack a little longer than usual. As it was at times like these that Mack also felt more comfortable speaking with Mill at length. Recently Mack told Mill that someone was overheard trying to sell a handgun.

This news was not particularly a surprise to Mill, as gun laws in the state were not particularly restrictive. Access to firearms was simple. But selling a gun in a venue of alcohol consumption was a potentially dangerous situation, and it would be good to know who was involved in any and all transactions. You never knew when that information might be useful.

90

"Pastor, sir?"

Dan Owens turned to the man's direction. "Hello?" he replied.

"Uh, hello. Pastor, sir, my name is Merle."

"Yes, Merle, Of course I remember." Dan's next thing to usually say was How can I help you? but he waited a moment. Usually whoever started a conversation with him would need little or no prompting. So he waited.

"Pastor, sir, can I speak with you?"

"Sure, Merle. Do you want to set a time to come to the church?"

"Yes."

"How about tomorrow morning or afternoon or evening?"

"Tomorrow evening is good."

"OK, I'll see you tomorrow evening."

It wasn't an unusual conversation. Pretty mundane as it goes. Dan was used to the slow beginnings. But it was not uncommon for slow beginnings to later reveal larger and more complex situations. So it would wait until tomorrow.

91

Johnny Tried slid out of his vehicle and the building. Security checks were never perfunctory in his line of work, and he usually liked it that way. Security without enthusiasm was an invitation to mistakes.

Once his security check was complete, he made his way to his desk. First things first, he quickly scanned the daily briefing to see if there was anything that needed emergency handling. Every few weeks nowadays there was one of those emergencies that needed immediate reaction, but today was not one of those days. A good thing, he through, as Derk was due back today. He would need to catch Derk up on what all had transpired in his absence, and an emergency would possibly derail or at least postpone that plan. Johnny wanted to assess Derk's emotional state after visiting his parents. Whatever Derk's words might be, Johnny felt he could gauge Derk's state of mind after a parental visit.

But there was an upside to Derk being away. Johnny had taken some time to think about Derk's situation without him around. As an initial interviewer, Johnny had reviewed his file before he was hired, so Johnny knew the financial strain that Mark Sims was in and how Derk was a major support of

his parents. The situation of a government worker in a sensitive position under personal or familial financial stress is always a potential security risk.

Johnny also knew that the factory where Derk's father had been employed at the time of the accident was one his grandfather's company had once owned. It had been sold to a larger conglomerate ten or twenty years before it has been shut down, so there was no direct connection with Johnny's family. But just that fact of prior ownership could potentially have impaired their relationship, so certainly there was no need to bring it up.

Johnny's family's business was still tightly entwined in the area. They were the fourth or fifth largest shareholders in most of the privately-held utilities that dotted the landscape. They owned many mineral leases, and still owned numerous properties, including several large and small plots of land which were leased to local farmers and homesteaders. He realized that if he dug into it, his family probably owned or controlled land for several people that Derk knew or had known. Maybe every single one. Better to also keep this quiet, too.

"Hi, Johnny," said Derk as he came in.

"Derk, welcome back. Hope it was an OK time away."

"Not bad. Got a chance to relax a little, too. It's always good to take some time off, and it's always good to be back"

"How are the parents?"

"Good as always. They are enjoying being retired."

92

The days and then the weeks started to roll by. Derk and Johnny had their daily meetings, then normal days' activities: research, piecing together news and data. It took some weeks, but finally Derk felt the lure of his hometown start to fade. At first, images of Janice and Marie came to his mind several times during each day. It was like he wanted to put some focus elsewhere for a time. His encounters with them was a bright spot in his world, and he wanted to nurture the feelings they engendered. Why not take a few moments to relive good experiences? There was no thought of running back for more episodes. It just was to dwell in a positive moment in his life. It happened to him, so why not bring that happiness with him throughout the day?

Derk reflected on his decision to use his time off to visit his parents. He had assumed it was the right thing to do, and when the opportunity had come up, he did not hesitate, and he did not consider other options. Some he knew took vacations to warm places, or foreign countries. Derk had curiosity about these other kinds of places, but he was so centered on his parents and their lives, that at the time there

was nothing else to think about. He wondered if there would be time when he would venture away from the known, but he quickly admitted to himself that he was a creature of his world, and his world was his job, and his parents.

Derk's parents' life, all now surrounding the accident and lawsuit, which obviously weighed upon them, but for himself, though he supported them as he could, and he remained solicitous of their conditions, he nonetheless had found a space, an emotional gap between himself and their world. The encounters with Janice and Marie guided him to understand he was his own person apart from his parents. The conversation he had with Pastor Dan Owens cemented in his mind his need to allow himself to own his distance from them.

93

They might be tempting, but I, Randall Harpin, won't succumb. Maybe not everyone has the highest regard for me, but I am not totally stupid. Two predecessors of mine are still serving time in state prison because they allowed themselves to fall to temptation, and if I learned anything, it is to learn from other people's mistakes.

Those teen-age years make the women most vulnerable. They way they develop, Both physically and emotionally. And the boys as well. Since I cannot control the world, nor them, I only do what I can. I try to explain the dangers to them, but sounding like a fuddy-duddy is probably how I come across. "Oh, Mr. Harpin," they would say with that Gee-whiz tone like they know everything and don't need to guard themselves against bad choices.

Maybe some of the girls do get in my mind and into my thoughts, but acting out on things like that is the danger. That's why I keep the door open whenever I talk to any of the students in my office.

It would help if my wife hadn't walked out. But she's gone and there is nothing I can do about it. My job is my life. And in addition to being the principal, I am also one of the math teachers. The extra income makes a big difference for me.

It certainly is fortunate that we did not have any children. From what I see, the misery would have compounded exponentially. We either would have been forced to stay together, which would be like living in hell, or the post-marriage financial situation would have decimated me. Plus the guilt. So being childless eliminated so much distress.

Not that I ever really wanted children, but when a marriage is young and feelings rise, children might seem like a good idea. But it is a lifetime job, and one has to be ready, and willing, and able.

I would think that a safer locale for a single male teacher with younger women around would be a community college. At least their ages, over 18, would not get a teacher incarcerated. Maybe

disciplined, and rarely fired. Unfortunately, our local college might need to fold. Not enough financial backing, salaries barely higher than in my high school, and insufficient student enrollment. Barely enough enrolled at the fall semester, but many were gone by the third month.

So few of them even in my classes seem to have enough capability for appreciating math at all. They think there is no use for it, or its of no relevance to them. So I try to use life examples to make it interesting. But even in that I need to be careful. Last year a math teacher at a high school in the next county over used "packages of oxycontin" in a math example, and was disciplined for it. At his hearing he said he wanted to use a real-world example his students could relate to. They wanted to fire him but there was no one to replace him, so they kept him. I hope I know better than him. As an example, last month I used numbers from Nascar races to try to interest some of the boys. Previously I tried to use units of types of food needed to feed a growing family to see if could raise enthusiasm among the girls. Unfortunately neither did.

No semester completes with the same number of students it began. Common causes for girls are pregnancy, just not showing up, or running away. Boys will be disabled or killed in accidents, arrested for behavioral problems or drug dealing, but by and large the largest reason is drug abuse including overdose. I've had some students walk into class and fall down out cold, or I might walk into a classroom and find some of them out already. It is so sad.

Once in a while I will encounter a student for whom math sparks more than a temporary interest. If I do, I try to encourage it. Sometimes I would send them to the community college for a short course, hoping that they could develop some inspiration to grow more, learn, or consider how to go further. I'd like to hold a meeting and call it a symposium, even if only a once or twice, but there is usually only one student per semester to whom it might be of interest, if at all.

Being single now makes school activities simpler for me, no need to get my actions approved or debated. No longer on the receiving end of deprecation. Of course that means no steady companionship. Truthfully, nowadays occasional companionship is preferable to a constant disparaging companionship.

It took some time to see the world differently. After the divorce, I was living in my own sorrow for months and months. Later, it was like when I become calm, and I then could see some others in the same state similar to mine. The hints were subtle and the conversations were reserved, but I saw the discreet actions the other single adults took to pairing for some companionship. It was occasional and sometimes infrequent, but it was there. When I determined that I was ready, I began slowly. Now I can say that I have quiet companionships with some like-minded persons. Another teacher, some other local residents, all of us keep to our lives with reserve. Most of us prefer to remain single, most of us have had strong disappointments in marriage relationships. With the understanding we are likely not galloping towards another marriage, we have the space and comfort to take our time living in the world and connecting periodically with others. Which brings me to understand, with a great relief, why I do not need to consider any of the underage female students I encounter at the school.

At first Pastor Dan Owens drove Paul to Farid's for his first few English lessons. But after those first few times, Paul decided that Pastor Dan's schedule needed some freeing up, so Paul called O.C. Transit.

Every town has its glue, the people whose presence and activities are the basis for the cohesiveness that comes from and holds a community together, even if no one ever acknowledges the secrets that are not really hidden. One of those persons was Oscar Caleb Birdsley, known to all as "O.C." Mr O.C. has one of the more enviable jobs, as he was the main postal mail delivery person. He was mainly admired for finding a job from which rarely anyone was laid off.

As part of his daily rounds, Mr. O.C. delivered not only mail, but also information and, using the vernacular term, minor gossip. That was a given and did not stand out as unusual. Where Mr. O.C. deviated from the norms of mail delivery, and crossed into infractions, was how he used his mail delivery vehicle as the equivalent of a free local taxi service. Many local residents of lower income and bereft of transportation were seemingly stranded in their homes. Mr. O.C. allowed himself to transport one person at a time on his route from one location to their desired destination elsewhere on his route. Since the vehicle was not large and had the space for barely only one other person, it was unknown if there would be space on any one day. So Mr. O.C. relented to demand by giving his phone number to all who asked. He carried a small calendar booklet and would mark requests when asked, or if booked would inform the caller. Thus Mr. O.C. served a vital service when a resident needed transport to a medical appointment for which otherwise would have proven difficult. Mr. O.C. very well understood that his actions were inappropriate and could potentially get him charged or dismissed from his job. But he persisted, as the residents in question had few other resources to call upon. The entire convenience came to be called "O.C. Transit" by all who knew it. The other mitigating factor in O.C.'s mind was that he was also the senior postal supervisor for the local region, thus he would likely be in a position to know if any postal service investigation was imminent.

In two areas he never wavered. He never accepted money for all his transport volunteering. If someday he was caught by postal law enforcement, he did not want financial gain to be among his charges. And he never would accept items for delivery which had not come through the postal service. Too many stories circulated in the ranks of his fellow postal workers of those who found themselves in prison upon taking on private items to deliver, often drugs or other contraband. Prison was not appealing in the least, regardless of how tempting an offer was made.

So, in deference to the possibility some inspection might be someday imminent or underway, those he transported all knew that should they call O.C. one day and be greeted with a "Sorry, wrong number" or

a "I haven't seen him in a while," or other delaying message, they would understand that they needed to back off and wait until things were hopefully clear again.

Those in service occupations, like O.C. himself, often can fall into a situation where their presence to those around them revolves wholly on their role derived from their occupation. There can be difficulties forming and maintaining friendships that do not rely on one side's occupational knowledge or services. So O.C. found himself initiating some connections. So it came to be that, over time, O.C. gravitated to speak with Dan Mill. Mill was not one to trade information with O.C., as police investigations were privileged. But O.C., in his need to socialize and unburden, was the loquacious half of their conversations. Thus, O.C. became one of Dan Mill's sources of local information, and if the truth be told, gossip as well. Some of the "news" that O.C. spoke of were things that Dan had knew about or had surmised. Some were revelatory.

Whose roof needed replacement, whose garden was going to weeds, which local was sleeping with whom, whose children were starting to come under the influence of drugs, and so on, all fell into the observations of O.C. So many things that people thought private and unseen are really observable to the observant.

Dan was as attentive as O.C., if not more. Dan's law enforcement training, as his innate perceptions, gave him as much insight into people's behaviors as one might expect. O.C.'s habit of relaying his observations to Dan Mill just reinforced Dan's understandings.

95

At one time or another, Dan Owens had thought that he might make a list of everyone he encountered or had heard about. A list seemingly would be of benefit to him by assuring no one would be forgotten. But the sheer burden of maintaining it, adding the information relevant about each person, and their connections to each other seemed insurmountable, at least to an individual. Theoretically, it might be possible to assemble such a record, but the effort required to update and sustain it was beyond his energies. It would take a small army of individuals, and he was one person. Anyway, a group effort would obliterate the personal understandings and observations that he really would want to incorporate in such a project. He abandoned the idea, realizing that if he relied on his personal perceptions, he would best any bureaucratic endeavor.

Dan did, however, find himself on the receiving end of talk that seemed to likely just be backyard gossip. He was determined to be open-minded in hearing whatever people were willing to tell him, as one never knows when yesterdays idle comments turned into today's crises. While he felt he didn't want to bother with the insignificant, but he realized since the other person was taking the time to tell him something, it was likely at least of interest to them. So he demurred from criticizing them or cutting them off. It comes with the territory, he sighed to himself.

"It certainly sounded like heated words," he was told one day by a woman who often was seen at church.

"Oh?" he replied.

"They seem pretty nice. You know them, the couple with two small children. They've been here a few years, and the kids were usually in the backyard running around and making the usual kid noises. We didn't interact much, just over the fence talk, giving each other some fruit from the trees, things like that."

Dan waited.

She went on. "Sometimes they would have guests over, no big deal. But that day, they had guests over, and the sounds at first were regular, seemed like just friends or relations, although sometime later in the afternoon the discussion got loud.

"Afterwards, later that evening, it seemed that everyone else had left, and it was just the two of them, they had heated words with each other. I couldn't make out what they were saying, just the sounds. It went on for a while.

"The next day it was real quiet. Just silence, it was too quiet. I was surprised."

This was an opening, Dan could speak.

"Surprised?"

"Yes, too quiet. Then second day after the heated words there was the sound of one of the children, alone in the yard, riding some toy up and back, without speaking a word.

"The third day the woman was back with her children. Then the day after that, they were all back in the yard, and they seemed normal, and there was no heated words, them talking to the kids and each other, like nothing had happened."

"No heated words," Dan repeated.

"Yes, there was nothing."

Dan tried to be gentle. "Things are sometimes not what they might seem."

"You could have fooled me," she said and changed the subject.

96

As befalls many in a service role, especially one in a public-facing institution, O.C. was often assumed to one of those who would assist others regardless of the circumstances. This role is likely to be

expected by the general public of such "public" service personnel as mail carriers (as O.C.), local librarians, and various other public servants.

Now, O.C. did run his little underground transit service, so his generosity was well known. He told himself he needed to be alert to parry hints or even direct requests outside of the desired areas of his hospitality. Yes, I will help you get to the doctor or to the pharmacy, within the confines of my route. But no, I cannot help you paint your house or do your taxes.

In his quieter moments, O.C. wondered about relationships he had been in. Why was it so hard? Why does so much acrimony arise in a relationship? Or to put it another way, was his experience normal and common? Or was he, or his relationships, doomed from the start because of what he was as well as what his partner was? Sometimes it seemed that there was no solution, no escape from the inevitable and inescapable decline and dissolution of a relationship.

And that famous line, "When you marry, you don't just marry a person, you marry a family." But there is so much more. When you marry, you also marry a holiday schedule, also a culture, also certain fashion styles, also a cuisine, also a history, also an attitude about the world, also opinions about nationalities, also opinions on definitions of cleanliness, also financial parsimony and indulgences, also fears and anxieties of the future and past, and so on. It's basically endless. It is like living in multiple worlds (or personalities) at the same time.

Was there a choice? Either be single and complain about not being married, or marry and complain about not being single.

97

Deputy John Mill spent most of his work time either in his patrol car or in the police station. The police station office was a place to catch up on the latest news, finding out who was missing, or who had become wanted, or who had died. Sometimes a special assignment appeared, but mostly it was to prepare for his patrol. He relied on a small group of dispatchers and his fellow officers to keep him informed and alert to what he might encounter.

When he drove on patrol, he tried to be in constant radio communication with the office, although the hills sometimes made communication spotty. After driving the same roads for years, he already knew the areas where he would have difficulty reaching the office by radio.

He found he enjoyed his relation with Sue. And from the looks of it, she was happy with him as well. After his divorce from Catherine, he had wondered about his possibilities with women. No man is unhurt from a divorce, and he was no exception. He certainly took his time, and knew that anything rushed was something to be avoided. He had seen it in too many others. A rebound is as destructive as an initial entanglement.

Law enforcement is a complex beast, so he understood that explaining the details of numerous actions to anyone else would be a difficult and painstaking endeavor. He didn't want to force Sue to listen to him go on about his day and the complications he encountered if she wasn't interested. So he had to reflect her reactions and desire to know.

For her part, Sue was interested up to a point. Though she wanted to generally understand what he went through, there was a limit to what she thought she should know about. She knew she was more interested in him outside of a job. So she encouraged him to speak of his work, but not to entangle her in the complexities. She made an effort to make sure their conversations and activities included things outside of his work. And hers. He was grateful for the boundaries. He didn't want to feel obligated to discuss every detail, nor did he want to keep his work life silent when he got home. So they settled on a comfortable arrangement: some work talk, but not overwhelmingly so. Neither of them wanted his work to be the sole topic of their interactions. There were some basic questions that needed to be asked, she said. Have you ever fired your gun at someone? Yes, and I might have to again in the future. Have you ever killed anyone? No, but it might be necessary someday. Promise me you won't ever point your gun at me. I promise I won't. That was enough for her.

98

As it happened, one of the many patrons of the Standing Bar was O.C. himself. One the completion of his rounds, should there be no passenger that afternoon, O.C. would stop by for a beer. An exchange of pleasantries was always on the agenda. It was in these exchanges that most of the unsaid gossip of the town was said. The patrons, and Mack the bartender himself, were all in one of the many states of being under the influence, so later it was always impossible to know what was said, who said it, what was retained, and what was pure fantasy of the listener.

The Standing Bar was an establishment that attracted many of the town's residents, but rarely would many stay for extended periods. Patrons would arrive, drink a bit, and after conversations of varying lengths, would leave, mostly likely to return later the same day or a following day. It was a routine that kept Mack busy and entertained. He thrived in the quick turnover of regular patrons, and since he would recall each patron's favorite beverage and some aspect of the previous commentary, he was well liked.

From time to time, O.C. would proclaim to all within earshot, "I was married once." It was something Mack had no problem hearing every time. Most times, some additional tidbit of his history might be forthcoming. The past was continually being refreshed and renewed. Alcohol could always be counted upon to unwrap a person's self-interpreted past.

"I was married once," might be all he said, or maybe some other pronouncement would be said. At other times, he might state, "Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

In a more sober atmosphere, the general comment "I was married once," might be taken as an invitation to initiate a conversation, or at least a comment to respond to, but in these Standing Bar circumstances, it could prove to be ambiguous. Certainly from time to time, responses were made, or even a retort. Many times O.C. might himself respond to whatever was said back, and yet at other times did not respond. Or his response might be a repetition of his initial statement. At other times his response might be his other frequent comment, "Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

Of course, O.C. was not the only character who dropped their declarations about marriage, the other gender, politics, or any of many topics upon those present.

99

Johnny glanced around the room. About thirty people were present. He stood up and addressed the room. "The monthly meeting of the History Society will come to order." The group quieted down. "This evening we have Angeline McBurney from Interior with a very interesting presentation on this history of cultural anthropology."

Prior the the meeting, Johnny and the speaker had dinner together where she accepted his invitation for a nightcap.

"Thank you Johnny. My name is Angeline McBurney. I've been at Interior for eleven years. Tonight we'll talk about the historical origins of cultural anthropology." The projector was on, and she toggled the display to the first slide. "In 1647, the Bartholins, the founders of the University of Copenhagen"

After the meeting, Johnny and Angeline went out for a post-meeting drink at a hotel. They talked for some time. Then she said, "I'm liking you, Johnny."

"I'm liking you too, Angeline. I have a room upstairs," he replied.

She smiled, and without other words, they headed towards the elevator.

Three hours later, it was time to leave. Spending the entire night together was out of the question, as many marriages seemingly depend on the appearance of normalcy. But in reality, many marriages depend on the regularity of appearances. So both Johnny and Angeline returned to their respective homes, and spouses.

"Late night, honey," she said as he arrived home.

"Riveting meeting," Johnny spoke with a small but obvious hint of sarcasm.

"Sarcasm does not suit you, dear," she said.

"Indeed," he replied. "Just get home?"

"Yes, not more than half an hour ago."

"Crisis somewhere?"

"Minor crisis in South America."

"Hopefully resolved?"

"We'll see in a few days."

That was as far as the details of their day to day work went. No specifics were shared. They were trained and inculcated in maintaining an informational divide between different parts of their lives.

100

From time to time Johnny wondered at the conditions that unending secrecy in government operations precipitated in those that worked in it. Was it the cause or the result of the secrecy and pretenses inherent in many marriages? In government and in society, all sorts of shenanigans seemed appropriate in private, until they became public. Then distress, embarrassment and often scandal were the direct result. If it was acceptable in private, why was it unbecoming in public? The inconsistencies of modern life seemed a source of amusement and occasional bewilderment to him. But he held himself steady and would not display those qualities to others. They could be considered a sign of less than complete commitment in his work. And his dedication to his career was primary.

The History Society was one of a several endeavors Johnny participated in. He enjoyed the social cohesion these groups engendered. There were the subjects and purposes of the several groups that piqued his curiosity and desire to learn new and interesting topics. By virtue of the fact that in some of these groups he took on the task for recruiting speakers and presenters, he was able to widen his circle of acquaintances and contacts: always useful for federal employees. It provided avenues for professional networking, as connections and reputation could lead to advancement. And finally, it gave Johnny opportunities to periodically meet and connect with female counterparts. Such as Angeline McBurney.

101

Angeline McBurney arrived home to find her husband had not yet arrived. Although he spent some nights out of town each month, she had expected him back by now. Without waiting for him, she prepared for bed. It's so easy to not want to come home when spending part of the night with someone else, she thought. She could have easily stayed all night with Johnny Tried if they both didn't want to leave. But that would then complicate her relation with her husband. I wonder what would happen if he didn't make it home tonight? It was just easier to go home. She drifted off to sleep.

She awoke to the sound of the doorbell. Persistent, she realized. Glancing at the clock, 5:00 a.m. Must be something worth being up early for. She put on a robe and headed downstairs. She glanced out the window and saw a police car. Damn, trouble. She opened the door to two uniformed officers.

"Mrs. Johnston?"

"Yes, that's my married name. What ... ?"

"James Johnston is your husband?"

"Yes, Oh god, what happened?"

"May we come in.... It would be better if we sat down."

A moment later they were seated.

"We regret to inform you that your husband was killed in an automobile accident."

102

"Johnston is my husband's name. I use my maiden name McBurney at work. I work for Interior, and ..."

"Interior?"

"The Interior Department. James ostensibly works for State, the State Department, but he is in the military working in one of those agencies."

"I see. Your husband was identified by the ID he was carrying and by his fingerprints. But for positive identification, it would be appropriate for you to identify him."

"Oh. I don't...."

"Unfortunately, the accident was not local. Out of state."

"I expected him home last night. He does travel on business every month, but it's only for a day or usually two."

"Yes. Do you know what his itinerary was?"

"No, I don't. I was just going to ask you the same question. But his superiors should know."

"We can make arrangements for you to visit the coroner in question."

103

"Mill here."

"Mill, the is Howard Graymond."

"Doctor Graymond. How may I help you?"

"Wife of the deceased from the fatal one-vehicle accident yesterday will be here tomorrow afternoon to make a positive identification."

The county had a standing rule for an officer to be present during identification of remains. It was a time when people were most vulnerable, and let their guard down. When a case was deemed a likely homicide, then it was at times like identification that unexpected things might sometimes be revealed. But if foul play was not suspected, then an officer was a formality.

"I see. I'll be there. Thanks for letting me know."

Mill looked over the items found in the vehicle. Nothing stood out. A cell phone. A small overnight bag. Some clothes. A receipt for a hotel in the state capital.

Without indication of foul play, Mill would have done no further investigation, but he decided that sooner was better than later to request recent activity on the cell phone from the vehicle.

104

"Yes, that's him," say Angeline McBurney Johnston. "Do you know what he was doing he was around here?"

Graymond stayed silent. Mill spoke up. "No, ma'am. That was something we thought you could shed light on."

"I have no idea," she said. "He worked in government like I do but most everything he worked on was confidential. He often spent one or two nights away each month on business, but I don't know the details, or where. His superiors should know."

"I see," said Mill. "By the looks of things, he lost control of the car at some point. No evidence of anything nefarious."

"Thank you," she said. She sighed. "I need to prepare a funeral."

Graymond spoke up. "We can release his remains. We can contract to deliver him to a funeral home in your area by Friday."

"That would be kind of you," she said.

"We have his effects here. The overnight bag and clothes were in a carrying case." Angeline looked it over and sighed. She picked up the case and left.

After she left, Graymond turned to Mill.

"Two men in uniform were here yesterday to inspect the remains."

"Uniform?" said Mill.

"Military. Seemed our victim was in the military. Had a desk job in a Washington agency and wore civilian clothes, but was military."

"I see. Did they indicate anything on this case?"

"No. I analyzed stomach contents and blood, which I showed them the results. Some but not a lot of alcohol, no drugs. Maybe he just fell asleep at the wheel."

"Did they agree with your findings?"

"They seemed to accept it. They did take some DNA samples and took their own fingerprints."

"Well, if they did not commandeer the body, and they made no objection to release it for burial, then I'd say they were confident in your assessment. Unless there is any other evidence, case closed."

But something led Mill to not let go. He had not included the receipt from the hotel in the effects returned to Angeline McBurney. Something about the receipt stayed on his mind. So a trip was in order.

105

The drive to the state capital took a few hours. At the hotel's front desk, Mill identified himself, and asked for information about the person identified by the receipt.

"Let's see... yes it was a Johnston, Mr. James Johnston. Stayed here one night. Usually comes here every month."

"Anything occur while he was here?"

"Hmm. Let's see. He made two phone calls. Oh yes, I remember. He said he had forgotten his phone charger so he had to use the room phone."

"I'd like to have the numbers," Mill asked.

The clerk gave him the numbers, but then said, "Ummm, I think I could tell you something."

"Tell me...."

"The woman who usually meets Mr. Johnston here also has been here regularly with another guest."

"I see, Can you tell me that other person's name."

The clerk turned his monitor briefly so Mill could glance at the screen.

Mill noted the name. "Thank you, that is very helpful."

106

The first number that had been called from the hotel phone record was located in the state executive administration building. Mill entered the building and showed his identification. After some quick inquiries, he found himself on the third floor.

"The captain will see you now," a secretary said.

Mill found himself in a unfamiliar branch of the state police headquarters.

"Captain Frank Hall." A tall man introduced himself as Mill entered.

"John Mill. Sheriff's deputy."

"What brings you in today?"

"Follow up on a James Johnston. He was killed in a vehicle accident earlier this week. Records show he called your number."

"I see. This is confidential but I think it best to level with you, Mill. Johnston is, was, a major in the Army. There are liaisons between the military and state police in every state. So he was assigned as my counterpart. We touched base once a month. Originally he would come by monthly, but after a while, if there was no crisis, I told him we could catch up by phone or video chat, but he insisted he needed to come here."

"Do you know why?"

"I suspect two things. One is that he wanted to show conscientiousness. His expense budget for travel was pretty meager, but he wanted to use it, get out of the office. Maybe they kept tabs on him, or something. But the second reason is I believe he had someone he wanted to see, and if he continued to travel here, it would be easy to see that person."

"I see. Thank you for your time."

107

After he returned to his home office, it was a simple matter for John Mill to determine the ownership of the second number Johnston had called from the hotel. It turned out it was someone he knew.

He drove up the small drive. This house has a nice porch, Mill thought. Perfect place to relax. As he got out of his car, Marie Fry came out of the house.

"Well, hello John."

"Hi Marie."

"How is Sue?"

"Fine. But I am here on some police business."

"Oh, I see. Let's sit here."

There were large comfortable chairs on the porch.

"I'm here because a call was made to you, your number, from a hotel at the state capitol."

"Oh." She did not sound surprised.

"James Johnston. You knew him." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I heard about his car accident." Her voice wavered. She was ready to cry.

"Go on," said Mill.

"Well, I met him through Frank."

"You know Frank Hall." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. I've been seeing both of them."

"Both of them." It wasn't a question.

"James would be here once a month for his work, and I see Frank once a month. Alternating two weeks."

Mill sat with that for a few minutes.

"I see. When was the last time you saw Johnston?"

"The night of his accident." This time she did cry.

Mill waited.

"He was here. He was fine but tired. I told him he should not drive if he was tired, that he should stay over, but he said he needed to get back home."

"Did he say why he needed to leave then?"

"He wanted to get home to his wife."

"And your feelings about that?"

"I was fine with it. He didn't want to leave his wife. I didn't want him to leave his wife. I liked things the way they were."

"If you met him at the hotel, why did you both also come here?"

"I went up to the state capital every month to meet him and we'd spend one night in the hotel. That's all his expenses would pay for. So then the next morning I would come back home while he did some more work there, and in the evening he would come here. It was so we could spend more time together. Then I would see him again the same way the following month."

"And then you would also see Frank Hall."

"Yes. Two weeks after James left, I would meet Frank for a night."

"At the hotel." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, at the hotel."

"And then two weeks later, Johnston again."

"Yes, that's how it works. Worked."

"And they both knew about each other?"

"Well, they didn't ask about each other, and I didn't volunteer. I had met Frank and saw him once a month. Then one time when I was out with Frank, we ran into James, and Frank introduced us. When Frank was preoccupied with something, I gave James my number and that's how I started with him."

"I see."

He waited. Marie did not say anything.

After a while, he said, "Thank you for your time. And, sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," she whispered.

108

Mill drove back to his office. Soon it would be time to resume his regular patrol. But he pondered what he had stumbled into. Marie Fry was having affairs with two men associated with law enforcement in one form or another. One of which is at the state level, and another at the federal level. Both probably involved with confidential matters. And they knew each other. One had introduced Marie to the other one.

Marie's story seemed innocent enough. But he wondered if there was more, and should he continue digging. It sounded like the more he dug, the more that would get revealed. Confidential things. Things that may be out of his league.

He had not unearthed any criminal behavior or wrong doing. It was always a question... when to let it go.

109

The funeral of Major James Johnston was held in a large church near his home. Angeline McBurney Johnston had arranged a small memorial service at a local funeral home, but when she heard that many of her husband's co-workers and colleagues were planning, even expecting, to attend, she called a large church to arrange for it to be held there.

It is a truism of our existence as humans that funerals are more for the living than for the deceased. And it was no different at the service for James Johnston. Most attendees brought their significant others, such that a large minority of the persons attending had never met him.

There were nods between those persons who knew each other. There were unsaid questions, "Is that his wife?.." "Is that her husband?.." "I wonder who that person is..." "That dress is too bright for a funeral..." "That person did not bring anyone..." "I don't see a wedding ring on that person..." and so on.

And there were several unspoken, silent emotional collisions. Most of Major Johnston's co-workers, both superiors, peers, and direct and indirect reports were in attendance. Most of the men wore suits, a few were in uniform. Most all of the women wore black in one form or another. Some of them had previous entanglements with others present, perhaps without the knowledge of their accompanying spouses. Things could get messy. But this was not place or the time.

Johnny Tried and his wife were present, as was Derk Sims. Johnny Tried, like most funeral attendees, knew that he needed to keep his gaze low during the funeral; direct eye contact is often not appropriate in such a situation. There was a large enough group that he sat far away enough from the immediate

family such that he would not need to avoid making eye contact with Angeline McBurney. He knew himself well enough to know that even at the end of the service, when everyone gave their condolences to the family, he would have no problem behaving professionally towards Angeline. And she towards him as well.

Derk Sims sat a few seats away from Johnny and his wife. Derk had arrived alone, and was considering how many people present he had seen at his office that he knew or had seen one time or another, that he did not immediately notice that a few rows in front of him sat Marie Fry. But later during the service, he did notice her. He wondered, did she come with someone who knew Johnston? Was she here because she knew him? If so, how did she know him? He wasn't sure what to think. But it was not a time or place to come to conclusions about other attendees, so he let it go. He was grateful that he had noticed her first.

Marie Fry herself was not immune to her feelings, and she had prepared herself with sufficient handkerchiefs, as she knew she would cry again. But her focus was also distracted when she realized that a few rows in front of her, sat Captain Frank Hall. Marie knew well enough that Frank Hall had known James Johnston, so there was no question in her mind about his presence. She just felt a little fragile, and wanted to keep herself from overflowing with emotion.

There were a few prayers, a short sermon, a few short speeches, and a few hymns. As the ceremony ended, all quietly moved past the casket to give their condolences to the widow Angeline McBurney Johnston. Not a few were happy to see that it was a closed casket.

Thank you for coming, she said continually. Some mourners said to her that they knew her husband because they worked with him, or had known him in some other professional capacity. It was not common for the agency to have a social function that invited spouses, but there had been a few military-related social events in the past, so Angeline did recognize a few faces. For the most part, however, the presence of most expressed that James Johnston had known many.

The mind sticks to sober matters in situations like this. Brutal honesty has no place at a funeral. Even those who had slept with Major Johnston were as deferential at the funeral as those who had not. Those who knew him as a superior were as compassionate towards Angeline as those to whom he was a direct report. Those who had slept with Angeline were as tender as those who had not. Please accept our condolences. Thank you for coming, she repeated.

It was after the giving of condolences to Angeline that everyone seemed to congregate outside the church door. Very few seemed in a hurry to leave. Not surprisingly, some small groups of co-workers gathered together. There were more nods and quiet acknowledgments. No one would admit it, but for those who knew each other through their work, it was also a time to be seen. It was possible that nothing bad could happen by being seen at the funeral, at least from a work-politics point of view.

As she exited the church, Marie Fry saw Frank Hall speak briefly to a few people in uniform, and he then immediately left.

It was then that Derk Sims and Marie Fry saw each other.

"I didn't know you knew James," Marie said.

"I didn't know you knew James," he replied. He suddenly realized that it might have sounded harsh by his repeating her comment word for word, so he quickly added, "I met him through my job."

"Oh," Marie said. She just stood there. Derk realized her eyes were filled with tears. She tried to clear her throat but needed to wipe her tears. "Sorry," she murmured.

He wanted to ask Did you drive all the way here for the funeral? but realized that probably sounded judgmental. So he said, "Did you drive down?"

"Yes." She started to cry silently. "Sorry, I get emotional at funerals. Weddings too."

"I don't live that far from here. If you are not up to driving back so soon. You could relax at my place, we can get something to eat, and." He left the sentence in the middle.

"I think I need to not drive back so soon. Thanks. Where is your place?"

He gave her his address.

And so it came to pass, that Marie Fry and Derk Sims unexpectedly were able to spend some time together.

They drove separately to Derk's place. The time gave Angeline enough time to compose herself to think of how to explain how she knew James Johnston.

"I met James though a group of friends. In the last year or so, James was in the area on business once in a while, so he would come to a dinner party at a friend's house."

That sounded plausible enough, so that's what she said when she got to Derk's apartment. What she didn't consider is whether Derk would ask about why any of those friends did not attend the funeral. But Derk did not ask nor did he think to ask.

"I need to change," she said. She had brought a small overnight bag with her. She used his rest room, he changed in his bedroom.

Derk, even though deferential to Marie, was hopeful that the subject of his parents would not be the main topic of their conversation. In fact, he had entertained the possibility in his mind that the subject of his parents would not come up at all.

"Let's just sit on the sofa for a moment," she said. "It's never fun to attend a funeral. After one of those things, I need to relax."

"Sure."

There was a quiet pause. She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." He put his arm around her shoulder. "I'm happy to see you."

One of their stomachs quietly rumbled. They both laughed. "God, it feels good to laugh," she said.

"At a funeral, sometimes it feel like I will never laugh again."

"That's why it's good not to go to a funeral every day."

They both laughed again.

"Speaking of food, I know a few nice places around here. Do you have a preference for any particular kind of food?"

"No, Derk. You decide."

So they went out to a local place. Afterwards, they went back to his apartment, made love and slept.

110

The morning light woke them. Derk was glad he did not have to go into the office that day. Marie turned to him.

"Good morning Derk."

"Good morning," he replied.

"We're in your world here, Derk. Nothing has changed about how I feel. I'm really happy we met up here even if it was at an sad event. I'll be going back home today. Back to my world. When you come back in my direction, let me know."

"Marie, you are a wonderful woman."

They kissed again.

It wasn't until after Marie left that Derk realized the subject of his parents had not come up at all during her visit.

111

A nice young man. Perhaps if we were the same age or even close... but that is not worth thinking about, Marie considered as she drove home. Her drive took some time as she was not a fast driver and was in no hurry to get back. Even if we were the same age, it would never work. Derk seemed that type

that would want to eventually settle down with a wife and family, even if he lets himself yield to temptation nowadays.

While she had enjoyed her time with Derk, it was just that, some time. Like a fancy desert. Not something you made a habit of indulging in often. I'd like to see him again if he was available, Marie thought, but not for a while.

Her thoughts ran back to James Johnston. Oh, poor James. Ran off the road on his way home. So sad. James had always seemed so principled. But on the other hand, he was having an affair. He had told Marie that both he and his wife were free to do as they pleased. You never know if men told the truth, at least about that. Many a man had told a woman who was not his wife that his marriage was open, but it often was a lie. But seeing his wife at the funeral... Marie considered that James was telling the truth. She had sensed some non-verbal impressions that told her there were more connections to some at the funeral than ordinary propriety would expect.

And Frank Hall had been at the funeral. While he ostensibly did not notice her and thereby didn't acknowledge her, and left immediately after the service, she fully expected him to make some comment about seeing her there. She wondered if her involvement with Frank was winding down. Well, she did enjoy all that attention from Frank and James. The regularity of alternating attention from the two of them was something she found amusing. Sadly, she agreed, it's over. James was gone, and that took away a lot of the interest she had in continuing with Frank. Unless she found someone else who might take James' place. I wonder who else is around....

But no, James' place was not something that can be replaced. This bouncing around with men probably needs to cool off.

She mused what she would tell Emily. Maybe it is time to be fully truthful. Emily would then open up and I could hear about others. Maybe we could start to trade men. Ha! That would be a hoot, she thought. Then she let those thoughts go. How safe would it be to spill every bean I have, even to Emily? Not very. But she did accept that she needed to talk about at least some of these events with someone, and Emily was the person these days.

112

After Marie left, Derk thought about the events that lead to their encounter. He of course knew Johnston as his manager, but he was manager in name only, he was a distant manager as far as Derk was concerned, and had delegated most of his group's supervision to Johnny. Which suited Derk, as Johnny was involved in the day to day analysis with Derk. Johnston seemed a person who was just there to keep other people informed. Well, his death will mean changes in the office, but all that was just something that happens. A new face likely.

Marie. Well that was a surprise. Dinner party in her area? Was there something more there? He wondered. He didn't know. Used to the life of the cover story, he let it go. He wasn't a detective, so it did not matter.

She was older than he, just about old enough to be his mother, and yet he felt a comfort and acceptance that he had not encountered with other women. Maybe it was because she was older and more experienced and at the same time accepting of who she was and who he was and had no designs on him. He knew that even if they were the same age, if they had tried to pair up for a longer term relationship, it was not a coupling that could last. For him, she was an intermittent extravagance that he could participate in only occasionally. Not on a daily basis.

113

Merle seemed reluctant to talk. Dan knew to wait, as he has had experienced this many times. Most people need to warm themselves up to speaking before they could open their hearts.

"I feel so immature and ... so impossible."

Dan looked at Merle, and waited.

"I feel...." Merle stopped. Why go on, he thought, and why bother. Aren't I as hopeless as I feel?

"Try not to stop yourself," Dan said quietly.

Merle took a deep breath. But still remained tense.

"Sometimes I feel I am so impossible, and why bother. I feel it is so complicated, and see no way out. No way forward. Everything is so heavy, so encrusted." He stopped.

Dan waited.

"I ... I'll come back tomorrow," Merle abruptly said, and promptly left.

Dan waited. He was used to people having their burdens.

114

Women were also part of the clientele of the Standing Bar, although they tended to frequent evenings, and more often than not, the company of other women. At least arriving with other women. Whom they left with was sometimes an open question.

Although the general area was not as isolated as one might think, there was not a lot of constant arriving and departing, so the population of Standing Bar customers did not change rapidly over short periods of time. Many of the patrons became familiar with each other. So, pairings and separations occurred on a regular basis, although perhaps not as obvious to other participants.

Mack the Bartender was the most obvious of the observers of the Standing Bar's social scenery. He prided himself on guessing who would return when, who would pair off with whom, or who would be leaving alone. Of course, he did not consider it guessing, as he had convinced himself he had the ability to perceive how personalities interact and what happens as a result. He was right probably half the time, which was good enough for the possible gossip he accumulated in his head.

It was no surprise when he saw various single men return to the bar after some absence. To Mack, it likely signified that they were bored of being single, at least temporarily, and whatever prior assignation they had been involved in had run its course, and so were on the hunt again. It was only a matter of some time before banter between the customers would commence, which would set everything in motion. In fact, Mack had a name for the condition he witnessed: men and women pairing up, separating, pairing up with others, separating, repeat. He called it "The Great Rotation."

Mack's accumulation of events and stories about locals had other affects. His central role in the river of gossip made him both attractive and objectionable to different sets of women. His being a fixture in some social circles made him attractive to those seeking affirmation in an extroverted context. But to those seeking prudence and discreteness, he could not be in consideration.

Eve Anders, for instance, did not find Mack a possible connection. While Marie Fry..., well, Mack was a link that lasted a short time. And so things continued.

115

Office life resumed the second day after the funeral. Johnny and Derk were among the many who spoke quietly that first day back. Walking past Johnston's office was not pleasant Derk said, and it was not a surprise that he met with agreement. Several functionaries went into Johnston's office, closed the door, removed papers, the computer and the chair. By the end of the day, there was a new computer and a change of the furniture. Who would want to sit in a dead man's chair just two days after the funeral?

But routines return quickly, and soon, regular communication and meetings resumed. Scuttlebutt on possible managerial changes always accompanied any major event, and this one was no different.

Office politics being what it is, and government office politics in particular, a replacement for Major James Johnston was not imminent. Instead some temporary reassignments were made. Johnny Tried was asked to temporarily fill in on some aspects of Johnston's responsibilities.

Johnny did not object. In fact he was pleased to be asked. Not being in the military himself, he knew his chances of being offered the position permanently were slim to none. Nonetheless, added responsibility would also look good. It was another possible chance to advance.

There were aspects of Johnston's work that Johnny had not known about but were revealed to him at the time. In addition to supervising a number of analysts and funneling information to and from several groups, there were some inter-agency assignments. Some of these now came into Johnny's responsibility. It was not particularly a surprise to Johnny that he was not given all of Johnston's tasks. With the compartmentalized nature of their work, he knew that likely there were things that Johnston had been assigned to do that he would likely not know about and not be assigned. Or maybe they would come later. There was a moment during the transition that Johnny did get a glimpse into some of Johnston's work assignments. One that piqued his interest was "Liaison with state police officials..." What was that all about, Johnny wondered.

For his part, Derk did not expect any change in his position. He realized that he was low enough in the hierarchy, which meant to him that he avoided the buffeting and turbulence that managerial changes engender with coworkers in a large bureaucratic organization who are also competitors. That suited him just fine. He was not jockeying for a promotion, nor was he interested in doing so. The more he looked, the more he saw that the higher one got, the more time one seemed to spend in combat with one's peers in the agency and in other agencies, as opposed to working towards common objectives.

And yet, in subtle ways, the ways of the office shifted slightly. While Johnny was not assigned Johnston's office--it remained vacant for some eventual replacement--nevertheless, by nature of his newer role, Johnny spent more time away from Derk. Meetings, visits to other offices, planning and reviews, and so on, ate up more of Johnny's time. Derk realized that it was possible that soon Johnny would become a "former co-worker."

And Derk's routine changed as well. Some newer personnel were in need of some guidance. Derk, by virtue of now having some years experience, was assigned. So now Derk's day included briefings where he was the one keeping track of several other new hires, reviewing their work, making sure they had access to the systems that included the data they needed. Derk now spent time reading their reports, giving opinions on how to write analyses, and so on. As a result, his expectations of little or no change were not realized. There was change. Death always causes change, even for others. He came to see that death, both literal and symbolic, probably causes more change in an organization than any other reason.

116

"I went to his funeral."

"You went to his funeral," Emily said. It was a question without a question mark.

"James."

"James," Emily echoed.

"I had been seeing him, pretty regularly for a little while."

"And?" This was a question.

"Car accident. Going home from here."

"Oh, how sad. I am so sorry to hear. You must be crushed." Emily reached for Marie, and gave her a hug.

Marie swallowed, cleared her throat, blew into a handkerchief.

"Yes," she murmured. Some tears.

They settled on the sofa. Marie wanted to say 'It's so difficult...' but waited.

"I met James through another guy I was seeing, Frank. So they knew each other." She could sense Emily's interest, but Emily knew better than to say anything. "I was seeing both of them, alternating."

"Alternating..." Emily said quietly.

"Yes. Well, James ran off the road and died." Some tears followed. "Probably fell asleep. It was obvious he was tired. I told him to stay over but he insisted he wanted to get home. To his wife."

"His wife...."

"Yes. You know me. I would never want anyone to leave their wife."

"Yes, I know you. You are so accepting, and, unconditional," Emily said quietly.

Marie cried again and took a few moments to regain her composure. Sighs and throat clearings.

"I went to the funeral. At the funeral I saw his wife. And Frank, the first guy I have been seeing. Then I saw and another guy, a young man..." Here Marie suddenly paused. She realized that she shouldn't use Derk's name. "... um, Danny, I had seen him once before. So when Frank left the funeral, I went home with Danny."

"You are one busy lady, my dear."

"Oh, at our age, we need to have ... we need closeness. Men included."

"Yes, I know what you mean. You are a gem, Marie. A wonderful woman, I am so glad to have you as a friend."

"Oh, Em. It's been so hard. I have this feeling it's over with Frank, and that's probably for the best. James' death took the sails out of my interest in Frank. Strange, huh. And Danny lives too far from here for a regular visit. And, no doubt about it, he is too young anyway."

"Things do change, dear. You hold on to yourself, and before you know it, all this will be in the past, and new happiness will be here."

"Thanks, Em."

"Let me cook dinner for us."

"You're a peach. I just need some TLC."

"Well, dinner home with a good friend, that'll nourish you."

They talked, Emily cooked, and they ate.

Later, over wine, Marie said, "After Mike left, I understood that I would never want to be tied down that way again. You know, at first there is something so comforting in sleeping next to someone who you've slept with before. It goes on for weeks, months."

"And...?"

"And then, after some time, months, all I would want is some free time. Time away, Time alone. Or time to be free. Being with the same person is relentless if it goes on day after day with no end. The relentless turns stifling. Give me some once-in-a-while men."

"Time enough later for those once-in-a-while men. You know I am a do once-in-a-while, but there is a time and place. And I can see you need a change, it has been coming for a while. And you and I have the freedom to take time out. You know what you need, dear, is to get out into the woods. You need to get out and walk in the woods. Not less than an hour a day. The woods, the air, the trees would do you good. Get you away from thinking about men. Time enough for that later. Your men are once-in-a-while, but the trees are sturdy, supportive, uplifting. The trees are committed."

After more conversation and more wine, they both agreed when Emily said, "Too much wine."

"I can't have you drive home this way. Take the sofa."

117

The next day, after Emily left, Marie did start that walk. Out into the woods on her small property. Instead of it just being "out in the woods," she let herself see the trees as supporting, sustaining. It is the trees which are always standing. The trees are what keeps everything upright.

Yes, I see the trees. The trees, the woods are standing, standing firm. Never bending, never wavering, always. Once in a while, time or wind takes their toll, but the trees return and revitalize. They stand. And I now stand with them. They give strength and hope. They *are* strength and hope. I don't need Emily to tell me that. But I am grateful to her that she pointed me here. I need to point myself more

often, I shouldn't need others to send me where I need to go. It should all be from me, from inside of me, from who I am, to know.

Emily was right, Marie said to herself aloud. Chasing men or letting men chase me, and all the complications of that... it's a mess. And that takes too much of a toll on me.

The trees of the woods, I hear you, I see you. I see your bodies, stamina tall and solid. I see your arms and leaves. I see how you confer form and shade upon the light from the sun. The light cast down from the sun that you envelope, cause to shimmer, waver and tame. Would that I were so strong, firm, solid, and understanding of my place. That I could be made of such solid presence. That I could know as much about a site by always being there, never moving, never varying. Just upward.

Thus Marie ventured further into woods. At first her own property. After some weeks, she decided to walk more, and walk further. There were numerous wooded areas adjacent to her. She knew most, if not all, of the tenants and residents of these properties, and they knew her. It was those local, familiar, neighbors, who wandered in the area, in each others' land. So it was no difficulty for her to enjoy her walks. Rarely did she encounter anyone else.

118

Merle sat down. He didn't look at Dan and said, "Sorry, but I had to run out the other day."

Dan quietly said, "That's okay." The hearts of all humans were seemingly always in turmoil.

"I don't know where to begin," Merle started to say. "Yesterday I realized I don't need to care where to begin, I could just start. Anywhere. And then just try to cover all the bases eventually."

"That's wise," Dan said softly.

"I'm trapped in the tar pit of my own limitations. I'm just plain stuck. I mean, I know most of it is of my own making, or what I have accepted about myself. But I don't see a way out of the complications of what I am and what I have made of myself. Seeing my own limitations does not make them go away."

Dan waited. He knew not to respond too quickly.

"I mean, how do people find their way out this kind of mess? I don't understand how they do it. I constantly feel like it all hangs over me all the time, like I am carrying tons of steel on my back."

"It's OK Merle. Go on."

"Everything is all tied together. Like my physical condition. My mental brain. My attitude. My view of the world." He paused. "I start. The start is my back, my spine. So I know it is curved. I am who I am. Combination of genetics and who I am. And how I let my attitude infect my body. I was born into a culture of limitations, trained in the education of limitations, raised in the religious atmosphere of

limitations. And it all continues in the culture we live in, that I live in. I do not see possibilities. I rarely see any opportunity for me to grow better."

It wasn't an argument, Dan knew. He wouldn't need to talk Merle out of his beliefs. He knew he needed to wait.

"I know it is mostly me. I have lived who I am, and changing my way of looking at the world is so difficult. Maybe impossible." Merle stopped, waited. Then went on. "What I was a child I remember a few people tried to tell me the story of the engine that could, that the engine could because it thought it could. This was trying to convince me that if I decided that I could do something, then I would be able to. My child mind was already formed, and I replied so decisively with 'I don't think I can,' which was my reply to someone trying to tell me I should change my belief about being able to accomplish something. If you think you can, you can, if you think you can't, you can't, and my mind was already on I think I can't so I can't."

"Merle," Dan whispered.

"It's like I am on a submarine, just dashing above and below the waterline of being depressed. Sometimes I am barely above, and sometimes below and submerged. Once in a while I dash up above it, like one of those whales or orcas, or whatever that jumps out and soon crashes back into the water. It is those times of being out of the water I have some clarity of vision, and enthusiasm, and energy to see possibilities, and maybe I start something or make a commitment to someone or some endeavor, but I can stay above the waterline for only a few moments and soon I crash down back into the the water, the familiar dreary world, and lose my interest, energy, and vision. I am like a periscope, I live below the line but see above the line, and I think I am above, mistaking one for another. When I finally turn it around and see myself, I really see where and what I really am."

Merle went quiet. Dan waited.

Then Merle continued. "I am so full of shame. Embarrassment." Another pause. "When I was young, in my late teen and early twenties, I was so stupid and ignorant. Not just wasting money, that was the simplest thing. I burned through people, treat people so poorly. I was young and stupid. Maybe others are like that at that age, I don't know. But when I look back I just want to crawl under a rock and never get up. I was in it for myself. If I could not see what there was for me, I was gone. And even if there was for me, I wanted to get what I wanted quick, and leave. Relationships were disposable. People were disposable. I have tried to slow myself down all these years since, but I am not sure I am any better now than I was back then. I certainly don't go through people now like I did then. But I still am so unsettled and ... " He trailed off.

Quiet. Dan knew to wait.

"Thanks for not trying to argue with me about me." Merle stood up. "I don't know what to do. Sometimes I think that talking about everything might be a good thing."

"Merle, my door is open," Dan said quietly as Merle left.

119

"*Assālam 'Alaykum!*"

"*Wālaikum Assalām!*"

"Pahl, Your Urdu better," said Farid.

"*Bahut shukriya*. Thank you, Farid." Paul relaxed in his chair. Paul could tell his pronunciation was improving. At the same time, he heard murmuring from the next room. Farid's wife and daughter evidently acknowledged his efforts by an almost silent whisper between themselves. He wondered if they took a glimpse of him from time to time, although he had never seen them. He wondered what they looked like. How old was Farid's daughter? There was much he did not know.

Farid's English had progressed where he could make himself understood, which meant he could possibly find some work. What would they do when Farid leaves the house? They would evidently not answer the door if he was not home. Much confusion could arise.

When Farid and family first arrived, Farid did short excursions initially with Pastor Dan Owens to purchase food. Deputy John Mill has accompanied Pastor Dan a few times. Owens wanted Mill to join them to help Farid be comfortable around local law enforcement. Later, Paul also accompanied Farid.

When Paul visited Farid's home, there was always food previously prepared. Because Paul would stay until a someone came to pick him up, Farid and Paul ate together. Paul did not raise the question of the wife and daughter. Obviously, Paul thought, they would be hungry, but seemingly could not mix with them in Paul's presence. He kept his questions to himself.

With Paul's coaching, and encouragement, Farid obtained a permit to learn to drive. Paul then took the role of driving teacher.

Farid had soon passed his driver's license test with Paul's assistance on other areas as well, such as filling out the application forms. After passing the test and receiving his license, Paul could sense a further positive change in Farid's attitude towards him. He was no longer a volunteer at Farid's home, but a familiar guest.

Once Farid received his license, Pastor Dan Owens had another surprise. He gave Farid use of one of the gifted cars the church had received. A few times Paul accompanied Farid on errands, but after some time Paul announced Farid was capable to going on his own. Now Farid was able to visit local stores and purchase food. And Paul no longer needed to rely on O.C. Transit or others, for Farid was now able

to drive to the Westfall residence to pick up Paul and return him later. And, now Paul was in a position to supplement O.C.'s transit initiative.

The independence of a vehicle gave Farid further confidence; occasionally Farid took his wife and daughter with him shopping or to visit some scenic areas. So that was how Paul, at a local market, saw Farid's wife and daughter for the first time. Paul greeted Farid who replied cautiously. Paul immediately understood that Farid's cautious behavior was due to his having his wife and daughter with him. They were wearing headscarves, and neither of them looked back at Paul. While American culture might expect everyone to be introduced to everyone else, such was not the case where Farid and family was from. So Paul gingerly retreated to another part of the store until Farid and family left.

At first nothing seemed to be different the next time Paul came to their home. Paul had previously noticed that Farid and family had a small garden growing. Vegetables and some flowering plants lined one side of the home. He complimented Farid on the garden. Paul was also surprised to see another car in front of Farid's home, but said nothing about it. Farid and Paul then went inside and conversed and reviewed the latest English lessons.

In the middle of the lesson Farid's wife and daughter, wearing headscarves, made their way from the bedroom to the kitchen. Nothing was said. They did not acknowledge Paul, and Paul did not acknowledge them, but a restriction seemingly had been broken. Paul watched Farid, and saw no discomfort. Farid's wife and daughter existed, and did not need to hide. Soon the sounds of cooking and meal preparation came from the kitchen. When Paul and Farid had finished their lesson, the meal was served. The women sat and ate with Farid and Paul, but did not look at Paul, and did not speak with him. Later Farid took Paul home.

120

Farid, now with his own transportation, was able to find occasional automotive repair work. He worked on some cars in need to repair, small engines, and related machinery. By this time, one or another car could be found in front of Farid's home as he did some minor engine repair. Paul had also learned the internals of engines by assisting Farid in learning the English names of various engine components. There was no full-time work available, and Farid preferred work from home. He could work on his own, and be around his family.

One day, Farid picked up Paul, and upon arriving at Farid's home, Paul was astonished to see Farid's wife and daughter waiting outside the home, accompanied by Pastor Dan and Deputy John Mill. Paul knew well enough to not say anything, but was confused as to why the four were outside of the home, seemingly to greet them.

As Paul and Farid exited Farid's car, Farid beckoned Paul to join him. Farid walked over to one of the vehicles he had been working on. Farid opened the driver's side door and said, "Pahl, for you."

Paul saw that it had been modified with complete hand controls. Paul would be able to drive using his hands, use of his legs were not necessary. It was all custom-modified, Farid had made all the modifications himself and installed them in the vehicle.

Paul, speechless, tried to say something, but in the moment, it was only tears that came. Finally he stammered, "Thank You." Farid, his wife, his daughter, Pastor Dan, and Deputy Mill all beamed knowingly and smiled at Paul. It was a moment of affection and recognition for Paul's efforts for Farid and family. Gaining his composure, Paul finally said "*Bahut shukriya*. Thank you."

At that moment, Paul was able to catch a glimpse of Farid's daughter looking at him, who did not turn away. He noticed her quiet smile. A little younger than me, Paul thought. He realized he liked what he saw. Then the moment ended, and all entered Farid's home, refreshments were served.

"A great gift. You deserve it," said Pastor Dan.

"Thank you," Paul said quietly.

"I see a lot of people and a lot of things in my job," said Mill. "And you deserve this."

"I can't speak. It's overwhelming. Thank you," Paul repeated.

The two women retreated to the kitchen. He could hear them murmuring to each other.

121

Paul continued his visits and lessons with Farid. One day, upon arriving, Paul could hear the two women busy in the kitchen. Then he heard two women's voices call out in unison, "Hello, Pahl."

Startled, Paul could not understand what he was to do. He had never heard them speak before, let alone with or to him. He quickly looked at Farid, but saw no indication what to do. So after a few moments, he said "Hello" quietly. He realized he sounded stiff.

They continued their work in the kitchen without replying.

Paul questioningly looked to Farid again. Farid was silent. The silence felt like an eternity to Paul, although it was only a short moment. Finally Farid said, "Now we in America, and life is change. You are like in our family."

Paul bowed his head, and said, "Thank you. I feel close to you and your family, too."

It was true. He had spent more and more time with Farid and less and less time at home. Farid and family felt more comfortable to him as time went on.

Farid called to the kitchen. His wife and daughter came out. Paul looked down. They did not look at him either. Farid said, "This is my wife Nazma, and my daughter Mahabbah."

"Pleased to meet you," said Paul without looking at them. But out of the corner of his eye Paul could see their headscarves were not as all-encompassing as they had been previously. A fair amount of hair was visible. And were they smiling?

"Hello, Pahl," they said in unison. But Paul heard some glee in their voices. Then they retreated back to the kitchen.

Paul closed his eyes briefly. A wave of relief came over him. A barrier had been broken, and all of them had stepped into a place none of them had been before. Paul realized that they all had planned this event, these introductions. But he knew better than try to discuss this with Farid.

122

In the woods. I'd call me now "Westy in the woods," if I was to name it. The place I prefer. I think I could live out here all the times, if I could. Maybe too cold in the winter, and food is sketchy, but the only peace peace and solitude there is is here.

It is one of the great things about this part of the world. A man can get out into the woods and no one can say a word about him, let alone to him. Being in the woods is a place, and it's a place of mind. Here I am. There is nowhere else when I am here.

One time I was a working man, with jobs to do and places to go. To feed a family and to provide. That is mostly gone. Robbie gone. Mary away, self-sufficient, on her own now; more than self-sufficient as she helps support us. But still she is away.

And now Paul. His volunteer teaching saved him. That is true. Before he started, he was a downward spiral. I feared for him and his future. But with his teaching, he gave himself a new life. Well, the Pastor Dan, pushed him along. But Paul's stuck with it, and I see him becoming part of them someday. He doesn't see it, it will be a while before it happens, but Paul and that family are clearly comfortable with each other.

It is in the woods where I belong. Sure, I sleep at home, often get food or take care of whatever I need to take care of, but the woods provide for me. So where Paul is or goes is how he finds his own self, that's ok with me. I know that because I know I found my own self. Here, in these woods, is where I found myself. With that family is where Paul has found himself.

When your child has found himself, you have found a life success, regardless of all else around you, and anything else going on in your life.

So in these woods, among these trees, here I am, here I become. I breathe and these trees breathe alongside me. I have brought myself to them so that they can find me in their midst. And with the shade they provide, there is the earthly nutrition they manifest, oxygen and carbon dioxide if I remember my high school classes. They produce their leaves and some produce their fruit. I understand the trees now, that their leaves that drop in autumn is as much to supply the earth as their edible fruit, and the leaves contain as much nourishment and substance as their seeds, which man calls tree nuts and animals need no name for. As long as there are trees to find, I will find them, and walk among them.

123

In his role as pastor, Dan Owens met and spoke with a large majority of the inhabitants of the surrounding area at one time or another. Perhaps differing from other denominations, his training included discussions of the consequences of personal involvements with congregants. While not from a denomination with strict celibacy rules, it was obvious that personal intimacies could lead to complications. He was unmarried, and for the simplicity of maintaining his role, he had kept his distance. While friendly and sympathetic, and offering all the resources at his command to any in need, he had drawn the line at personal relationships. It was only after some years in his position did he start to wonder about himself. He was struck by how individual lives can change dramatically at any time. He found his calling at weddings, funerals, births, and many kinds of crises, large and small. There were times he stood as negotiator for a distraught individual with a weapon, or eased a frantic runaway to return their home, or assisted the police in calming a recalcitrant fugitive. In moments of self-reflection, he asked himself if he wanted more. More than a role as an individual pastor, perhaps as part of a family, maybe even as a father. More than the family of his church, but as family of his own.

124

They had both learned how to show minimal recognition when encountering each other in the hallways and meeting rooms of the high school. No need to encourage speculation and rumors. They kept their public interactions as similar as their interactions with others. But when they were alone together in arranged evenings, they were themselves.

Emily: "I prefer it this way, don't you?"

Randall: "I do, Emily. While there are some nights I'd rather not be alone, all in all, when I think about both sides, this is the way I prefer, too." He smiled.

E: "It's such agony and misery when we trap ourselves into something that seems like it will go on forever, and we're never free."

R: "Like 'till death do us part? Spare me..."

E: "But it's a damn shame we need to be so discreet."

R: "It's the way of the world."

E: "I guess so. It would be awkward if it came out that two teachers were getting it together."

R: "That's the dichotomy. One the one hand we'd prefer a world where we did not need to be secretive and hidden, because on the face of it secret and hidden seem to limit our freedoms. On the other hand, given the world as it is, being secretive and hidden gives us the freedom to do and be as we prefer."

E: "So I will proclaim to all in the sound of my voice," she laughed. "I, Emily Sharper, being of sound mind and body, do hereby take you, Randall Harpin, as my present companion, without reservation, without past or future, knowing nothing of any entanglements or encumbrances, just because we so choose!"

R: "Ha ha!" he said. "I like it: Just because we so choose!"

E: "When you were younger, did you think that marriage and family was the only way to have a future? I gave up on that very early. Even before I had my first period."

R: "That early, huh? Well I did buy into the Disney television happily-ever-after for a little while. After high school I found myself going from one extreme to the other, up and back. When I had a girlfriend I couldn't wait to get out of it, feeling totally trapped and confined. I remember telling myself, 'If I ever get out of this, I will never ever ever have another girlfriend.' Sooner rather than later I got out of the relationship. Months later, I ended up feeling lonelier and lonelier until I got to the point where I would tell myself, 'If I ever get another girlfriend, I will never ever let go.' And so it went, ricocheting up and back. Until I finally woke up, and realized, 'There is something wrong with this picture.' I realized I needed something different in the world, something the average world and its average culture was not showing me."

E: "When I was a young child, crawling around on the carpet, I remember looking at my parents and saying to myself, if this is marriage I don't want to have anything to do with it."

R: "The process of waking up to one's own choices, in opposition to the fixed choices presented by all those around us. Culture, media, family, church, society... it's not an easy thing, especially at first. There's a lot of gnashing of teeth within. It's a struggle. There is such safety and comfort in avoiding confrontation with one's culture, just going along with the flow and choosing what is pre-chosen for us. To chart one's own path is a perilous task. Your young choice was courageous indeed."

E: "I guess I was lucky. I was too young to understand how difficult it could be."

R: "I firmly believe, when looking at what really happens in most marriages, that the primary purposes of marriage is to have someone to complain to and about, and to blame. People feel that they need to blame others for their situation because they cannot face the fact that what is really their primary obstacle is themselves. Since most people cannot accept their own responsibility, they need to find someone to cast it upon, and viola! the spouse is the perfect target."

E: "It's all about fear. Fear of the self. Fear of being responsible for one's state of being. Lives run by fear."

R: "Isn't that the human condition."

125

"Pastor?"

Dan looked up. He recognized her. "Oh, Janice, how are you?"

"I, uh, do you have some time?"

"Sure, come in, and sit down."

Pastor Dan Owens was used to impromptu requests for "some time." It not only comes with the job, he knew, it was his job, giving someone time.

Once seated in his office, Dan waited. He wanted to say "What's on your mind?" but he knew he rarely needed to say it.

"I think I need to talk. I have friends, I mean girl friends, and we talk, you know, and that's great. I am not alone, I have friends to talk to. But...." she drifted off.

"Of course, Janice." So he said it, "What's on your mind?"

"You know I work for my father, and I like what I do."

"I've seen you drive equipment at times."

"Yes, trucks, and excavators, and all sorts of machinery. And I am good at it."

Dan smiled. At least she wasn't disparaging herself. He waited.

"I like it here, and I like my job."

Dan waited for the "But."

"I want more. Not more as in more money or more toys. I want a more that means a wider, deeper life. I want a family. It seems things are limited here. I mean, I don't seem to meet eligible men. I mean I do, but they are not from here, or they are not the kind I would feel comfortable with, to settle down with."

"Every place has its advantages and disadvantages."

"Yes. I want a family. And I don't want to and won't do it alone. I've been looking for some time, and I don't see anyone here for me."

Dan considered her situation. A working woman in a man's world, who wants to raise a family.

"There are plenty of men who are walking disasters, addicts, overdoses, criminals, men who've lost the will to live, let alone love. I don't want them. I met a young man who was born here, who went off to college and moved to D.C., and has a good job in a government office. A great guy. But his world is there and not here, so there was no chance for me. I won't be moving there and he won't be moving here. I want to stay here. But I don't see those kinds of men here. I want a man who is kind and is smart, and can do things, but is also perceptive. Someone who is strong enough to hold a job, a man who has a life."

"I'll agree that it is different here. We don't have the force of gravity that large employers usually bring, or major government offices. We have other things. You have the desire for a good life. You do, which is great. Your desire for that kind of home and life would be attractive to anyone. And you are a doer. You learn and you can do."

"Yes, I can do. I can do things."

"In the physical world, we put effort and energy into learning and perfecting activities. In our emotional and psychological world, there is a subtle difference in how things work. Hard effort and strong energy is not always productive. Change can come from opening ourselves to possibilities, the possibilities of thought and the possibilities of experience. If someone went about hunting for a mate like hunting for a deer in the woods they will be disappointed. Regardless of what happened, whether they caught a mate that way or not, they are bound to be unhappy. So how to go about it? I cannot tell you someone is hiding over the next ridge waiting for you to find them, but being calm, and comfortable with yourself are the first steps towards being at peace. And a person at peace with themselves is a very attractive person."

"A person at peace is a very attractive person... ", she repeated. "I know that's true because my feelings about what is going on with me lately, I have not been at peace."

He continued, "Think about how you can provide some peace in your life, how emotional distractions are the opposite of peace of mind. Come to church more often. And we'll see how things can be different."

"Thank you, Pastor. I think I will."

I'm not sure if I am happy or not happy about how my life has changed with Mark. Of course the accident devastated us. Financially too. Mark lives and dies by that event, but I'm his wife, so I stand by him. He's gone too far, he relives it every day. It defines him, it is his entire existence now, years later. I won't let it define me. I wish he would be able to think about something else. He doesn't want to let it go. Maybe he feels less as a man because of what happened. But he still is my husband.

I, Donna, share his life and so I share his pain. Although I stand with him, in my mind and in my heart the accident and the lawsuit are things that happened. Sure, it was dramatic and severe and substantial, but I won't let it mean everything about me. It is part of the past. If Mark chooses to let it mean everything about him nowadays, that is his choice. I won't argue with him, but I won't let it consume me. I wouldn't be able to tell him directly, it would hurt him so. And there are other things I would never be able to tell him. Perhaps there are things he could never tell me, I don't know.

I was a wild one when I was younger, especially before I married Mark. By the time I met him, I was finally looking for something and someone stable. Mark was the ticket at the time. In a strange way, going through the aftermath of accident and lawsuit with Mark has given us the grounding I think I must have needed. It would destroy us both if we split now, so I know I won't leave him. And I see in his eyes how I am the sustenance he needs to survive.

If I let myself think back to how I behaved before I got married, it thrills me to remember some of my antics. There were men, sometimes different guys several days in a row. Somehow I got enamored with types of men or men from the same place. Once I tried to do all the men I could in a week who were six feet or taller. That was a doozy. Then there was the time I tried to sleep with all the prison guards I could find in five days. I think one of them later became the warden. I don't even remember their names. I was having fun and nothing would stop me. Until I got bored and sad, and I realized that just another man wasn't going to make me happy.

So I found Mark. He was a stable guy. Factory, stable schedule at first. Later he did trucking, so he was away for a few days at a time. I started to enjoy a few days free every month. That's why I am not sure who Derk's father really is.

I could never tell Mark. And of course, never would I say a word to Derk. Even though I ran around I wouldn't let on to my closest friends. Even in high school, Marie Fry and I were the closest. We both were party types, but we kept quiet about at least some of the ones we really were connecting with. It was just a flood of hints with each other. A survival thing I guess. And it lasted. Even though we have continued to be friends, names rarely were mentioned. I'm glad too because one time I bedded her husband Mike while they were still married. Later he left her anyway. And fortunately not for me.

It's a raw hard pain to be lonely and alone, and being married helps in that way. And sometimes I yearn for a break from the present. Or I think back to my youth when things seemed just waiting to be

experienced, and to be the source of wonder and joy. It doesn't come up often now, but once in a while I get the itch to take a chance on something. Or someone.

127

"Pahl, our family is happy to have you in our life," said Farid.

Paul smiled briefly. Over the time he spent with Farid and family, he realized how much more comfortable he felt with them than with his own family. He had sometimes let his mind desire to stay with them indefinitely, and never return to his father's house. His father being so distant and spending his time alone in the woods, with Mary living elsewhere, and the death of his brother Robbie, there was little attachment to at home.

While he had left himself conjure an image of living with the Farids, he could not perceive how it could happen. The more he saw of Mahabbah, the more he liked her, but from his mind he could not yet conceive how to bridge the cultural gap of indicating interest. He was concerned about behaving in what might be considered inappropriate in their culture.

So it was when Farid approached Paul and started talking about Mahabbah, Paul's first reaction was one of inward alarm, as conversations regarding personal appeal were all but unknown in his experience of Urdu-speaking culture. But as Farid went on, once Paul realized that Farid was speaking in positive terms, that Farid was not about to upbraid Paul, but rather Farid was sounding out Paul's possible attachment to Mahabbah, it was then that it dawned on Paul that it was not only Farid's interest, but his wife's and likely of Mahabbah's herself. That likely Farid would never bring up this topic if he had not previously discussed it with Nazma and with Mahabbah, that likely Mahabbah had indicated to her parents her interest in Paul, it was then that it seemed to Paul a new world had just opened to him, that his own concept of being in the Farid family was not an solitary daydream but now a distinct possibility, that he could help but feel transformed.

Paul tried to speak without stumbling his words, but at first he was able to only clear his throat. But then he was able to say, "I find Mahabbah very attractive, and I would be honored to be close to her." It again was one of those things where Paul had nothing to gauge his words against. What was the normal reaction in an Urdu-speaking environment that would indicate a positive reaction? He did not know. He wondered if he had said enough, or perhaps too much. But at once he realized that this questioning of himself in this context, always wondering what was appropriate in another culture, was one that was holding him back, his concerns about potentially doing the wrong thing was not helpful to his doing whatever he needed or wanted to do. That cultural awareness was a positive and helpful thing, but his constant self-questioning was only a hindrance, that if he was to do or say some faux pas they would likely tell him, that he was no longer an outsider being judged, but that he was close enough to them for

them to understand that differences were to be expected, and they had already in multiple instances quietly responded to him what their cultural expectations were, that they were as interested in learning Paul's expectations as he was about theirs.

Finally Paul said, "Farid, it would be a great honor to be in the family I have grown already to be part of." That sounded awkward, so he continued. "I have felt a close to your family for a long time. If Mahabbah accepts me, I would be honored to be part of your family."

Farid smiled. He already knew Mahabbah's interest and intentions.

128

In the following weeks after they had spoken, Dan Owens saw that Janice Husk did indeed start to attend Sunday services. He nudged her to be sociable, and talk with the people she encountered; and she started attending social events connected with the church. Dan also noticed some changes in Janice. While her job entailed rough and tumble equipment, which included durable work clothes, she started to wear nicer outfits to Church, she put effort in how she looked and how she set her hair. He liked that.

As Dan Owens had set a personal distance between himself and the women among the church's population, he had guarded himself against any entanglements. He felt comfortable speaking to any and all women, but it he maintained a personal emotional distance. He was extremely aware of the possibilities of downfall that had plagued so many clergy over the years. He instinctively considered that starting an attachment to any woman might offset his ability to be available for counseling to others. There were both sides of possibilities. Keeping himself single might make him seem open a neutral when speaking with women, but it also allowed for speculation as to whether he might be available to any one of them. On the other hand, should he be married, he might be considered "safe" in the sense since he was attached, then possibly other women might not be so guarded when speaking with him. It was sometimes difficult to know whether any woman had declined to speak freely with him because he was single or because he was a man. Or for whatever reason.

It was not difficult for him, as his heart had not led him to be romantically interested in any of the women he had until now encountered through his work. But now speaking with Janice Husk, and watching the transformation she had begun, had made her a potential focus of his attention. There were only a few years difference in their ages, and with all the working world aspect of her background, in his eyes she had also started to blossom as an attractive woman. No one liked to be misled, by their own thoughts or by others', so he carefully waited and watched.

There were always innumerable possibilities of misunderstanding. How could a person know how another might react upon a declaration of interest, even if subtle and unaggressive? How would a pastor indicate he was interested and at the same time not jeopardize his community place, his standing, his

role? A very narrow place to stand, he conceded to himself. The only way, he surmised, was to go very slowly.

129

Some churches get a reputation for being... well... social. Everyone gives lip service to a church's teachings, but it is obvious some are present for the social connections for at least as much as religious dogma. And so it was, as in many situations, that new faces were welcomed at Dan Owens' church activities. As Janice Husk slowly became a regular attendee, it was at the fellowship after Sunday services where she met with fellow congregants.

"Hello Eve."

Janice had determined that she would be outgoing, and not fade into the background, or run away. So she made a point to try to speak to people, starting with people with who she did not feel intimidated.

"Hi Janice." Eve's work in the church meant most knew her at least by sight. "How are you?"

"I'm good. What's new?"

"I have been going Mondays to a quilting group at the community center. I don't consider myself accomplished in quilting, but it is fun to hang out with other women, and it's quiet and social."

Now, Janice was not interested in quilting. But she made an effort to be accommodating. "Oh, really. Hmm. I'll think about that. Maybe..." her voice trailed off.

"What about you?" Eve asked.

"You know I work for my father's company. And this week we're thinking we might need to get a new truck... Oh! Sorry. That must be the most boring thing to hear. A new truck at work!" She laughed quietly.

"Oh, not a problem. I can understand." Eve smiled back at her. "There was a time a new typewriter would give me what to think about for weeks! Ha ha!"

They both had a good laugh.

Janice saw someone she did not recognize in the crowd. She turned to Eve and said, "Who is that?" She indicated a man on the other side of the room.

Eve, always mindful of her need for caution about others, could only give noncommittal reply. As much as she knew who it was, she realized she shouldn't say. "Not sure, I think I've seen him around. But I don't recall if I know a name."

Mindful of her need for caution. Eve recognized that in her position as secretary at the church meant she needed to be discreet. She didn't want the condition of her position to be a wellspring of gossip or inside information. In fact, she debated with herself as to whether going to church functions and services might inhibit, or even excite, other peoples' interactions, given her position. She decided that she would attend events only occasionally, and not regularly. She reasoned that being present from time to time would affirm that her church job was more than a job, that she was part of the community. But that not being present for every event would signal she was not a conduit of information to and or from Pastor Dan.

For herself, Janice now realized she had the chance, but also needed to make a decision. While her recent movement towards sociability and being more outgoing would normally propel her to at least introduce herself to new attendees, she also wanted to be aware of her internal comfort level. While she had felt an immediate safety about being around Derk Sims, that response was not automatically extended to all she encountered. In fact, although all she knew of this newcomer was what she saw across the room, he reaction gave her pause. If she had been pressed to put her feeling into words, it would have been... 'not sure this is a man I could trust,' So although she asked Eve if she knew him, it was for information, not for interest.

Gabe Henders had been told to suit up and "become a member of the community." If he thought about it at all, it seemed as if his employer wanted a foothold in the area, someone to join a church, someone to have his ear to the ground. Someone who would seemingly blend in, and should the need arise for some action, he, Gabe, would not be in a position to call attention to himself. If he, Gabe, was seen as a upstanding member of the church-going community, then he could be considered above suspicion.

130

Most of the time, I don't feel nothin', Mark Sims admitted to himself. Most of the time, anymore, anyway. I feel like I am carrying around a load of bricks on my back, one my shoulders, all day, everyday. I have no good luck, all is dark. I have my son who is doing well, thank god for Derk; I can think of some happiness because my son is doing well. We, Donna and I, raised him and he did well. She stood by me, as she should, and we have survived. I don't want to think of how bad it was when the accident and lawsuit happened. I try not to think back too much, but it happens sometimes. For the first few years, I couldn't help but replay everything over and over in my head every minute of every day. That's not helpful, it hurt me to go over it again and again it in my mind, but I couldn't stop it.

At least now there is some distance from the past. Not that my past was very good or very bad. Except for the accident and lawsuit which was downright bad and wrong. But that was a long time ago, and I cannot live in that time now, over and over, unless I want endless pain. For a long time I could not let go of it all, I lived in the pain and sorrow and shame and just full-on horror of being at the center of it,

being blamed for it, being the bad guy in it all. Caused a lot of pain in me, in the town, and some people went off the rails with it, so we had to get away.

So now we're away. I'm alone a lot, which is good. Donna handles a lot which I am happy for. Wish I could be more social. But I cannot bring myself to mix with many others. I feel such shame and anger at being within myself, but I cannot seem to break out of it. Those preachers say god forgives everything, and maybe he does, but I am not god, and I cannot forgive. I cannot forgive those who blamed me, and found me guilty, and took my savings, and my home, and my connections to people. Somewhere is that 'cannot forgive' group is me too. I guess I cannot forgive myself.

Am I the fault of everything? I am not, I am not the villain. But somehow I ended up in that place. To many, I am the bad guy. To too many, it is my fault. I drove the truck, and that was enough for them. Hang the driver they all seem to say. Most wouldn't come out and say it, but that's what they did. They all seemed to so deliberate and stroke their chins, but in the end I was hung out to dry. Now I can say the hell with 'em. Got so little now, there is nothing to come after me for. Well, I guess I am glad they didn't throw me away. I would not have not made it in a prison. On how I was feeling back then, it would have been in line with my attitude. But now, I am glad I am still a free man, well, as much as someone can be free with all the burden still on me. Those bricks never go away.

131

She did not need anyone to tell her that pride will kill you. She was well aware that she needed to focus on her work, her job, and that everything else would take care of itself. Not that she deferred technically to anyone. She knew what she knew. It was along hard climb, but in the end she had attained her goal. Her desk name-plate read "Mary Westfall, Ph.D."

Avoiding peripheral distractions, political maneuvering, and those angling for promotions, Mary's reputation solidified as a straight-shooter, strongest technically, but a clear-eyed realist on all things that matter, always willing to advise when asked. She was not taken by the fashions or popularities of the moment. She "stuck to her knitting," as the expression goes. But it is the irony of ironies that in a large organization, the more one sticks to one's knitting, the more management considers you a likely candidate for a wider role.

Of course, there are ways of resisting the siren call of other roles. The initial tactic is to not read anything into remarks or hints. Play everything straight and literally. That method is an essential tool for an extended period. Nonetheless, once hints or suggestions are not responded to, it becomes obvious that a more direct approach will be used. "Would you be interested in a new role where you would ...," might be a question posed. Some response entailing gratitude for being asked, but I am happy in my current role and would like to stay in it thank you very much, is an appropriate response

for those seeking to avoid such changes. And so, over time for a long time, Mary was able to manage no one, lead no groups or projects, and focus on her area of expertise.

132

In a large integrated oil exploration, refining, and retail company where Mary Westfall was employed, you would think that there would be a large number of Ph.D.s in research and planning, and you would be right. Over time, some moved into management roles, some lead projects or initiatives, most stuck to their fields of expertise, and younger graduates arrived. So, despite her reluctance, Mary became an informal leader. Beyond her field of research, she found herself unofficially mentoring new hires and guiding them how to maintain best engineering practices while in a commercial organization.

And so her mentoring role, initially focused on technical topics, quietly became well-known. New Ph.D. hires were knowledgeable in their fields of study, but most lacked a wider view of their roles, or potential roles, in a large organization. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most new hires were men, but over time the numbers of women hires increased slowly. Most all hires gravitated to Mary, as she was one of the few sources of practical guidance.

So, something that started as an occasional activity, which she meant to keep on an informal basis, eventually grew to where it became more and more accepted as one of her roles. At the beginning of her career she could have avoided it, but now, as years went by, she started to enjoy her mentoring. It was just a matter of time where it became part of her official duties.

It was in this role as mentor that Mary encountered some men she found who could be "of interest" had she not been a work colleague. She would never jeopardize herself, or them, by participating in an office romance. While she knew such things occasionally went on in companies, she would never allow herself to indulge. It was in her quiet moments that allowed herself to admit that from time to time she encountered a male co-worker who would have been of interest to her had she met him in another context. It was her single indulgence: to admit to herself her theoretical interest. But since she made no connections with these co-workers outside of her employment, connections did not occur. She did on occasion wonder what it would be like if she had. But it all stopped at her thinking. Nothing went beyond that.

Then some recognition came for her mentoring. A mention in the company newsletter, a company award, a wall plaque thanking her for her guidance, and so on. She was asked to prepare a new-hire "curriculum." As it grew, it became the standard for guiding those newly hired.

133

Trees. Many are older than I am. Trees were here before me, and will be here long after I am gone. They have regrown themselves for centuries, and barring the worst catastrophes, will be here for centuries to come.

That was comforting. The trees and the woods existed for their presence, the continuity of their presence. To provide the link between generations. That generations before me, and generations after me will have these woods. These trees stand for sustenance and comfort, and that is so nourishing to my heart.

These into-the-woods walks, now daily, became a companionship beyond the personal, they provided an expansiveness not previously experienced. Reaching high above, the tallness of the trees pointed skyward, and evoked as much as a Sunday morning worship.

It slows me down. One cannot walk fast in the woods. And that is one of its gifts. The woods demand, and have been granted, the power and strength to slow those who trod within. It is as if the leaves that have fallen, the branches, the terrain, the stones and the undergrowth, all have amalgamated to present a slowness to those who venture thought its heart. That is the message to those who come: slow or you will be slowed.

134

At social gatherings, it is simple and often possible to circumvent encountering someone with whom one feels uncomfortable. Westy, for many years even before the loss of Robbie, was discomforted with the possibility of encountering Marie Fry. When he had returned from the Navy, he found she had married.

On her part, Marie did not relish the awkwardness of close contact with Westy, so after a brief initial contact, she made little effort attempting to clear the air.

It was on rare occasional social events... a town gathering, a church outing, and so on, that they encountered each other. With the accompaniment of others who knew of the situation, there was never a face to face conversation beyond some generic, fleeting platitudes.

135

Using the woods and forests each as a personal respite from the encroachment of others, it seemed almost inevitable in retrospect that Westy and Marie would encounter each other. With no others to commiserate with, with many trees around but no immediate trees in close enough proximity at that moment to hide behind and pretend one did not see the other, with no others to console them or run interference for them, they were alone and undefended. There was no escape from the situation.

It was like for a moment they both froze. There was a silent acknowledgment, a small nod and a recognition. It would take some moments before either was ready to speak. But that they both stood there, and neither made an attempt to avoid or flee, stood as testament to a will to face their discomfort, and possibly cleanse.

Who would speak first? Who would take the first move towards verbal communication? For some moments, both waited, both were silent. The sadness of the past seemed to temporarily descend upon both of them, and kept them hushed and inarticulate. A small breeze kept them aware of their surroundings.

Finally, one of them spoke. In recollecting later, neither would remember who had spoken first. One of them said "It's been a long time," and the other had replied with the same words, "It's been a long time."

Slowly, haltingly, a conversation emerged. Through pauses, they spoke of some major events in their lives, and each expressed sorrow at the other's news, even old, of loss. The news was not new, and the other had heard of those events, but it was the time and place to be able to directly ask and respond. For Westy, loss of his wife and later loss of Robbie, for Marie it was the separation from and divorce from Mike. Then there were the smaller losses, like underemployment and financial distress for Westy, and uncertainty of financial stability for Marie.

And their dialog continued, at times haltingly, at times with an ease that surprised both of them. Feelings around shared history slowly reemerged. Initially it seemed neither would want to admit it to themselves, let alone to the other, but a certain sense of familiarity and comfort surfaced. Finally Westy said "Maybe we could talk again," and Marie replied, "I'd like that."

Then they went their ways. As she walked home, Marie found herself in tears. Walking in the other direction, homeward, Westy found himself with tears in his eyes as well.

136

It wasn't more than a few days later that Marie and Westy encountered each other again, again in the woods. This time there was almost no speaking, they just fell into walking together, in the same direction, side by side, as much as the woods would allow. Sometimes they needed to step over rocks

or logs, each paused as the other maneuvered around the obstacles that the trees and land had provided for them.

It was over the course of several weeks that they continued to meet and walk. Few words were spoken. There were times no words were exchanged. As they walked, they were together.

At one point, stepping over a stone and some fallen branches, Marie slipped and fell. Westy rush forward and held out his hand to assist her. She reached for his hand, took it, and stood up. No words were spoken. It was another step closer.

137

"I never knew mentoring, or speaking about mentoring, would make me so hungry," he said.

She looked up. Both of them were wearing badges that said Presenter.

She smiled back at him. "I never knew I had enough to talk about."

"It seems the attendees are happy. I saw quite a few say how much they liked your talk."

"Well," she said. He found a comfort in her presence, in how she replied to his comment.

Both of them had filled their plates and were about to find a place to sit. The room was large, with some tables and chairs available. "How about we sit here?" he asked.

"Sure."

They sat. The buffet line hummed along, and they ate and spoke.

"I see you work in energy," he said, glancing at her identification badge.

"Yes. Been in it a long time. Always something to do. Yourself?"

"Government."

"I suppose when there is a one word answer like that, you can't really tell me what it is you do."

He laughed. "Some things are better left off the table. Let's just say I mentor new hires, too. And keep track of them as they progress. Try to keep them out of trouble should they so choose to follow advice. Some are more receptive than others. Can't say I know the answer to everything."

Something in the cadence of his speech reminded her of her brothers. He was somewhat younger than her, but not out of her league, she noted.

"And," he continued, "I give my presentation after lunch. If you are free, I am on the schedule here..." He pointed to the description in the schedule sheet.

"I have a meeting and if I get out that early enough, I might sit in on your talk."

"Let's meet after the sessions are over for the afternoon. May I invite you to dinner?"

Surprised, she smiled at him. She had nothing scheduled for the evening. She realized she was free to do as she pleased, and she was happy. "I'd be happy to do so."

"I'm in room 1205. Let's meet in the lobby at 6:00 pm."

138

After dinner, he had taken her arm, and she did not resist. They walked slowly, and did some window shopping, talking.

She decided she was ready. When he asked, she agreed, and went back with him to his room. Soon they were making love.

Afterwards, they drifted off, close to sleep.

Derk finds he is, for the first time, in a comfort of his own heart. He thinks about this woman whom he just made love with. Nice, smart, accomplished. Could this become a long term thing? He wondered. For a moment, he saw himself with her over time.

Later.

"What is your full name, Derk?"

"Derk Sims."

"Sims?" She immediately jumped up to sit up straight, startling Derk. "Are you by any chance related to a Mark Sims?"

"He's my father."

"Oh God, Oh God, Oh my God, No!" She jumped up, frantic, already starting to gather up all her clothes. "I've got to get out of here."

"What's wrong? What is it?"

"Paul Westfall is my brother."

"Oh my God!"

"I've got to go." She hastily started dressing. "Get dressed, get dressed, get dressed!" she said to herself sharply, a little too loudly.

"Oh my god," said Derk who suddenly realized he'd better get dressed as well.

"Get dressed, get dressed!" she said to herself again, pulling on her clothes.

The two of them dressed quickly, not looking at each other.

"I've got to go," she said.

"I wish we could ... talk ..."

"No! I've got to go. I've got to go! Now!" And with that she ran out of the room.

She skidded down the hall. She couldn't nor wouldn't wait for the elevator, down the stairs she went.

Derk tried to think what to do next.

God, I hope she does not get pregnant, he said to himself.

God, I hope I do not get pregnant, she said to herself, careening down the stairs.

139

There was no denying it, Mary thought, this was just too weird for words. I can't get over it, it's just too wild. Unbelievable....

The next morning at the conference was a blur, a muted blanket. She heard little, saw less, and avoided everything and everyone as much as possible. For her, it was a godsend that her scheduled participation was over by the time she had encountered Derk, for it would have been a distressing experience for all had she been expected afterwards to be able to engage with an audience. But as soon as she realized she no longer had any commitments to the conference, although she was probably expected to hang around and mingle with the attendees, even that was just too much. So in a few hastily arranged moments, she checked out and left, to travel back.

140

After the fact, some encounters bring a sense of joy or accomplishment. Derk's visit to his parents that included time with Janice Husk and later the times with Marie Fry were those he could recall fondly and positively. But some encounters bring an emotional volcano, a destabilizing influence. Like the one with Mary Westfall.

Derk knew enough to project his outward calm. He knew that erratic behavior or even off-kilter words would bring strong reaction at his office. So he would need to keep his emotions to himself. But he let

his wonder rein free. How on earth could this happen? How could it possibly be that he ended up in bed with Paul Westfall's sister? He had sex with a Westfall. That was an incredible coincidence, almost unbelievable. After all that happened, all the misery that transpired, on both sides, there they were, bridging that gap with plain old-fashioned sex. What a world.

He found himself alternating between shame, simple astonishment, hilarity, sadness, and melancholy. Would it be possible to end up in a depression because of this? Had he somehow betrayed his family, his father and everything that had happened, however inadvertently, by sleeping with a Westfall? He could not even consider that he could tell his family. Even if nothing ever came of it, he understood then he could never mention this to his parents.

Well, another secret on top of all other secrets, he thought. He recognized that his work had trained him well: how to keep secrets. Now came the waiting game. It would take only a few weeks for her to know whether she was pregnant. She could always get an abortion, right? He had no idea what her feelings would be about abortion. But he wasn't optimistic. Most where the two of them came from were against it, although when an unplanned pregnancy occurred, so often an abortion was the quiet resolution. So he could do nothing but wait.

141

Her trip back was anxious but uneventful, and it could not be otherwise, as incredibly bizarre as was the encounter with Derk. She recalled an event from her childhood. She had been gifted a bicycle, which she rode with a happy abandon. One day as she filled the tires with air at the local service station, one tire blew out. The explosive force of the sound deafened her for an hour. For that time, there were no sounds, and she felt as if in another world, her own world. She could see the outside world, but she could no longer hear it. And to her, it felt the world could no longer hear her. While perhaps alarmed that this might be a permanent condition, nonetheless it was a liberating feeling. Alone with herself, finally really alone. In those moments, her thoughts were the only experience she could participate in or with, so the quietude of the temporary deafness was a new find, a clearing, an open field into a singular personal world no other could penetrate. It was then she first knew herself, that she contained an inner world, unknown and unavailable to others.

142

An urge came over him to call her. He wanted to hear her voice, to hear her voice as it was that night, to hear from her again murmur the sounds of consent. But he dismissed the idea. He could not call her.

Her retreat in such haste as soon as they realized who each other was told him everything he needed to know: she wanted all the distance in the world. It was like he had to let her go, but he could not. Something kept drawing his heart back to the desire to connect with her. I am a moth, and she is the flame.

143

For all the assuredness she had lived with for so long, she now felt off balance, like she had stepped on a floor that was not secured, that moved. Or like on an amusement park ride with its sudden turns and switchbacks. She knew her work, her field of study provided her the most stable and centered place. So she dove back into her areas of expertise, opening one textbook, or another reference work. But soon her mind wandered back to her life, her encounter with Derk, and all of her determined decisions. Why can't I concentrate and shut all of that out? I used to do that so effortlessly. Now it is a struggle. What had happened? She thought back to her conversation with Derk before they discovered who they each were.

144

The days ran into weeks, the weeks into months. Slowly he allowed himself to relax into the idea that she was not pregnant. If she was, would she have called? He didn't know. Or maybe she had gotten pregnant but terminated the pregnancy, which she could of course do all on her own, without his knowledge or participation. But now, several months later, the unknown state was past. She would have known by now anyway. If she hadn't gotten pregnant, then there would be no cause for a decision about anything. If she had gotten pregnant, then she likely would have either had an abortion, or choose to give it up for adoption, or less likely, to raise the child. As to whether under which circumstances she might contact him... he could not say. He was bewildered.

He realized that if she had gotten pregnant, she would have likely never would want to raise the child. The child would be half Sims, and the Westfalls would never want a Sims in their family. Or would she?

And if she was not pregnant, or no longer pregnant, would she even speak to him? Would she want to? It was as if he couldn't stop wanting to speak with her. He could not think his way out of this confusion. He was just so exhausted. It was like being lost at night: the road is dark, and there are no signs.

145

She tried to think of what he would be thinking of, but could not. For herself, she could not be clear on her own thinking, so why would it be helpful to think of his? Her leaving in such haste was a form of self-protection, she finally understood. And her self-protection was a reflex of putting distance between them. But what was she protecting herself from? Was Derk such a bad guy? My family is so strong in my heart, in my head, I know why I ran from Derk. My head is filled with my entire family connection, and this is all in my head. Am I free enough to see that it is all in my head?

All in my head. All in my head blocks all else. Blocks my mind, my vision, my heart.

146

Some time later.

Night.

Derk's phone rings. He did not recognize the number.

"Derk, Derk Sims?"

"Yes."

"This is Mary Westfall."

THE END